GSX-R1000 K5: 20 years at the top

Suzuki's iconic superbike celebrated **plus** why its engine is still The Boss

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SHOWDOWN

Tortoise vs hare

Sensible **NT1100** and loony **S1000XR** in Welsh bunfight

NEW BIKE

Speed Twin gets a caning

Latest Triumph 1200 meets the **UK's longest B-road**

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PLUS

Scraping through Aussie twists on an R1250GSA

Inside the Cole shed

Talking bikes and enjoying a brew with TV's Henry

18 pages of

KNOW HOW

Pukka adventure clobber reviewed

Life with a big Chinese bike

Know oodles about tarmac

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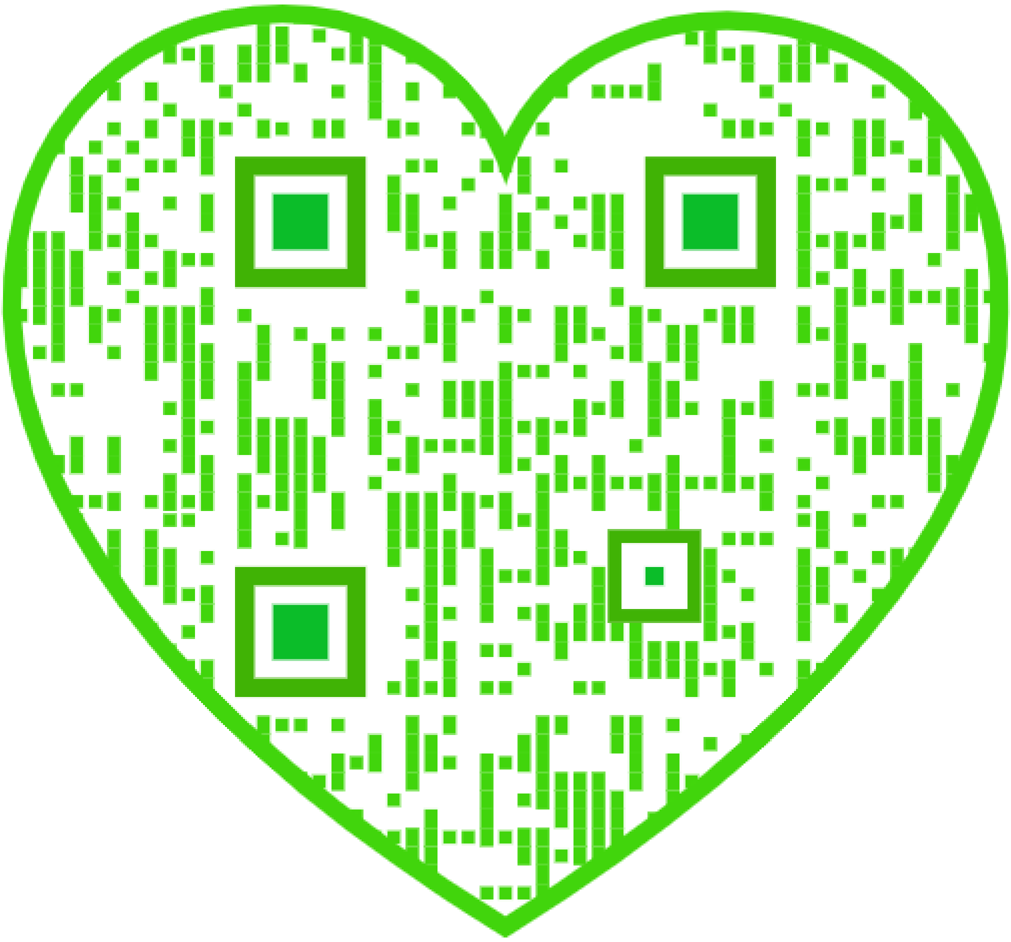

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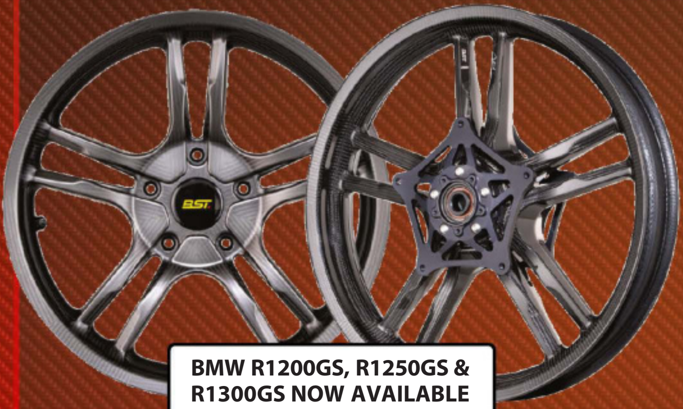

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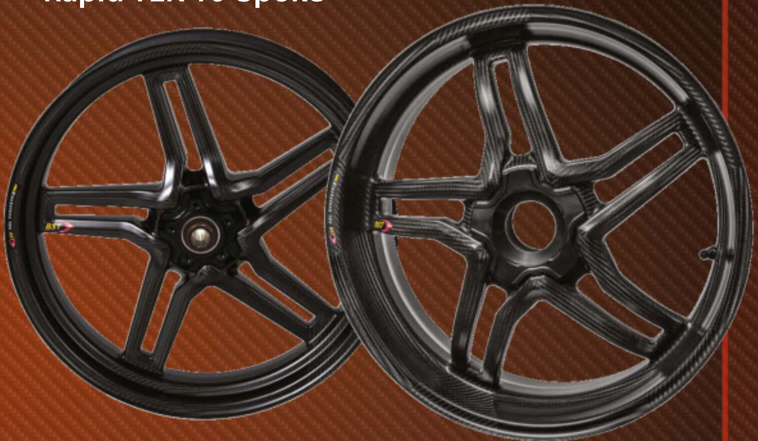

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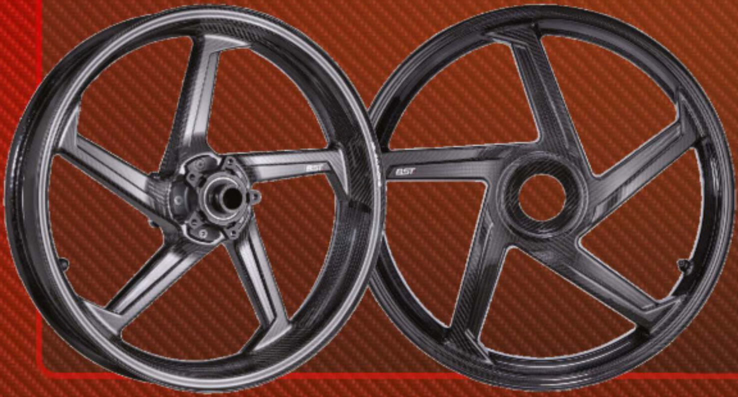

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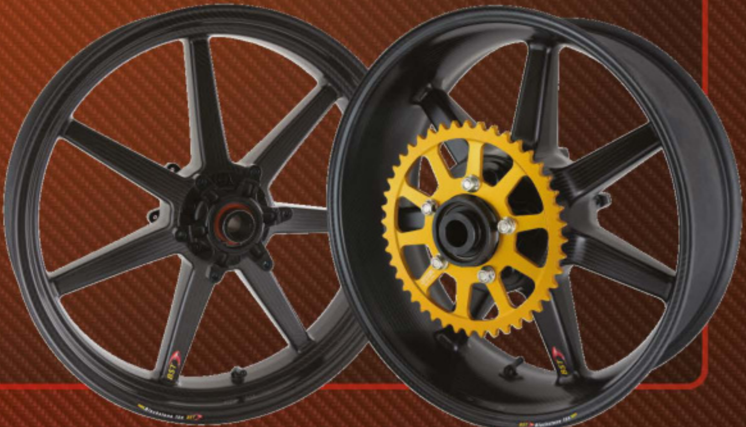

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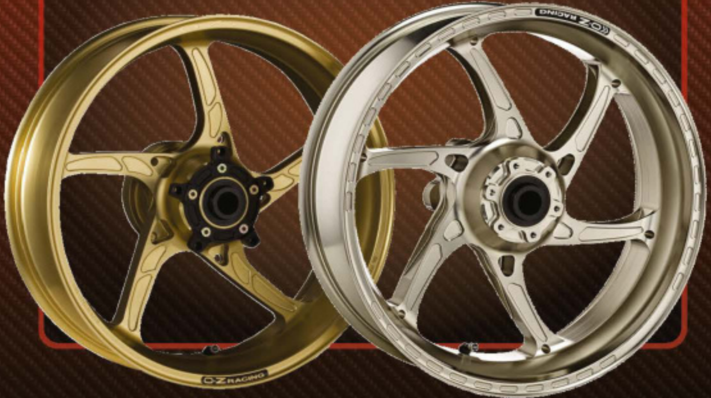

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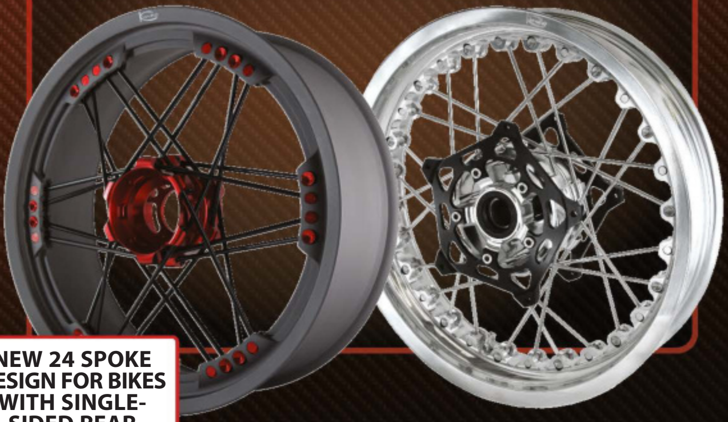

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‘Whatever your expectation of China, it probably doesn’t include this’

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UK’s longest B-road. It’s got lots of corners too

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Inside the Cole shed. Henry’s, to be exact

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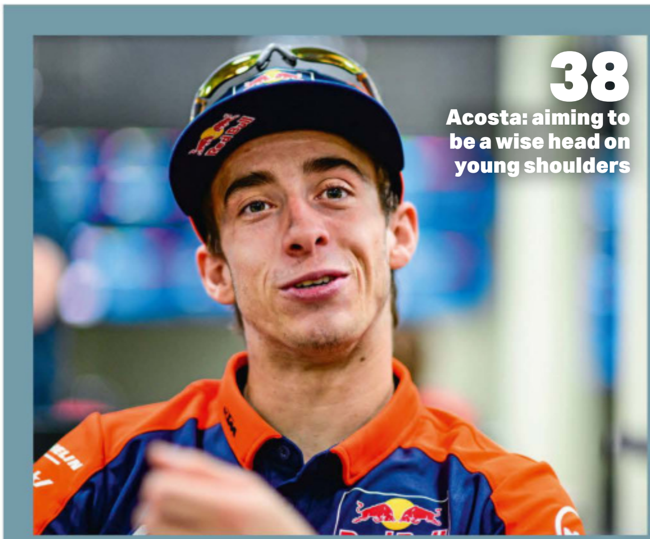

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Hello

Bike
Issue 626 May 2025
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Productivity in the *Bike* shack has dipped this month. Mother nature is to blame. We've spent the past week enjoying blue skies and dry tarmac, and the nice meteorologist on the telly says the coming days will be even better, with temperatures in the high teens. The office has been a place of road-trip daydreams rather than worry about deadlines.

This picture was taken almost three years ago on the North York Moors. Every spring I head off somewhere with a group of daft mates for a weekend of glorious landscapes, roadside banter, pub-based silliness and, of course, some great riding. Daydreaming about this sun-soaked 2022 outing reminded me that we need to schedule this year's frolics. We're off to Snowdonia in a few weeks.

There's oodles of inspiration for your own road trip in this issue. Martin Fitz-Gibbons beat me to Wales, pitching the new Honda NT1100 and updated BMW S1000XR against each other on an overnight jolly to the mountains (page 30). Chris Cope ushered the revised Triumph Speed Twin 1200 down the B6318, the longest B-road – and therefore longest proper road – in the UK (page 44). Plenty of compelling reason to look further afield too, with riding tales from south-east Europe and Australia. And even China – the bewildering photos start on page 80.

I have vivid memories of a few days scurrying around France on a *Bike* group test back in 2005. The roads were fabulous, the weather was kind. But it was the standard-setting Suzuki GSX-R1000 that left the biggest imprint. Hard to believe the legendary K5 is now 20 years old. Our celebration includes an owner's confessions, a dealer's insight, and an explanation of why the engine is so outstanding by our tame professor of mechanical engineering. He's got letters after his name and everything. It starts on page 51.

Right, I really must crack on. Enjoy the issue.

Mike Armitage
Editor

Top of Chimney Bank. Everyone wave at Dom

PICS: ANDY GURSKI

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Team Bike

This magazine is made by the most talented team of bike journalists, writers and photographers in the universe. Here's what they've been doing this month.

Repsol out, speed in

1

John Westlake

Rather than speculate on Honda's fresh MotoGP speed, John did it properly – and tracked down the team's technical director. Proper journalist doing a proper job.

Honda RC213V, page 18

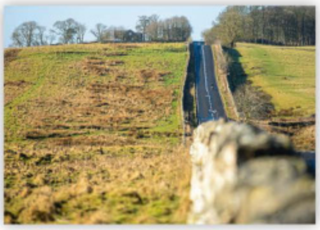
Tortoise versus Hare

2

MFG and JC

Few writers deliver tests with the authority and light touch of Martin Fitz-Gibbons. Few snappers capture the magic of a road trip like Jason Critchell. It's a dream combo.

Tortoise versus hare, page 30



3

Chris Cope

In a world of sound bites and AI flannel, it's a joy to still have fabulous writers. Chris' test of the new Speed Twin on the UK's longest B-road is considered, informed and ace.

History in the making, page 44

'It's all about balance'

4

Jamie Turner

Everyone knows the 'Gixer K5' engine was a masterpiece. Our tame professor of engines explains what made it so ruddy good – and why it's still a cracker 20 years on.

20 years at the top, page 51

The Cole shed

5

Henry Cole

That bloke off the telly invited us for a poke around his sheds. Not only were they full of glorious bikes, but Henry was full of wisdom and anecdotes. He makes a nice cuppa, too.

Inside, page 64

In search of Shangri-La

6

Martin Bissig

Swiss photographer Martin went for a trundle around China. We're not quite sure what we expected him to send back… but it wasn't this. Riding in China is jaw-dropping.

Adventure, page 80

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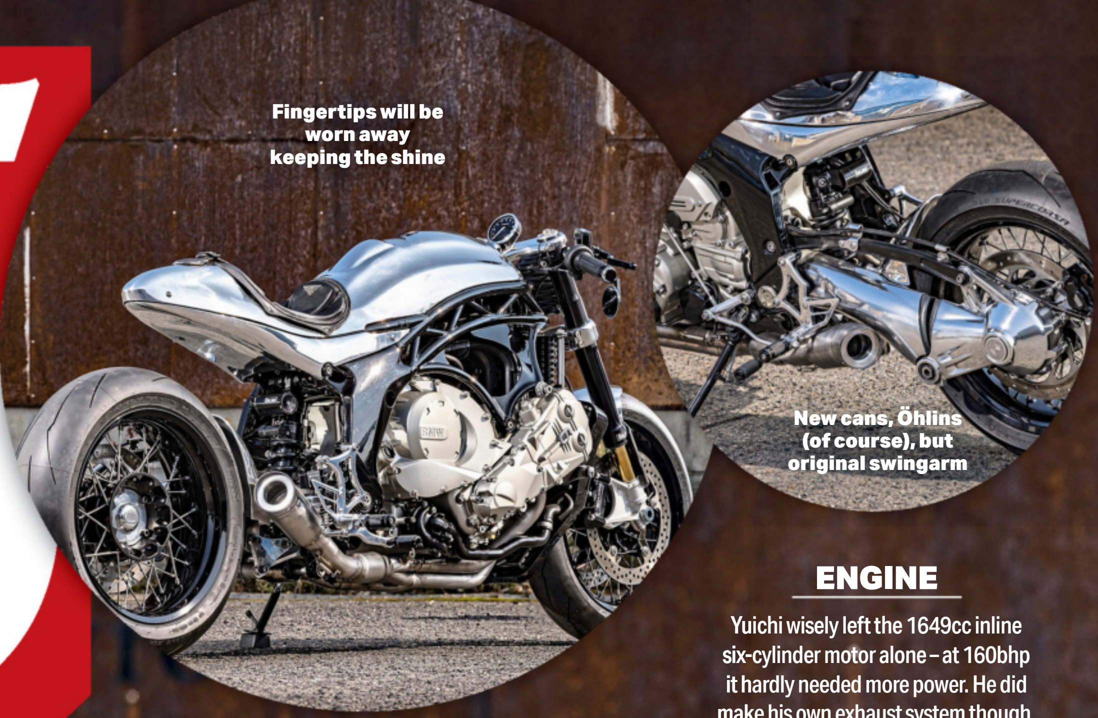
5 BIKES THAT REALLY MATTER THIS MONTH



Fingertips will be worn away keeping the shine

New cans, Öhlins (of course), but original swingarm

ENGINE

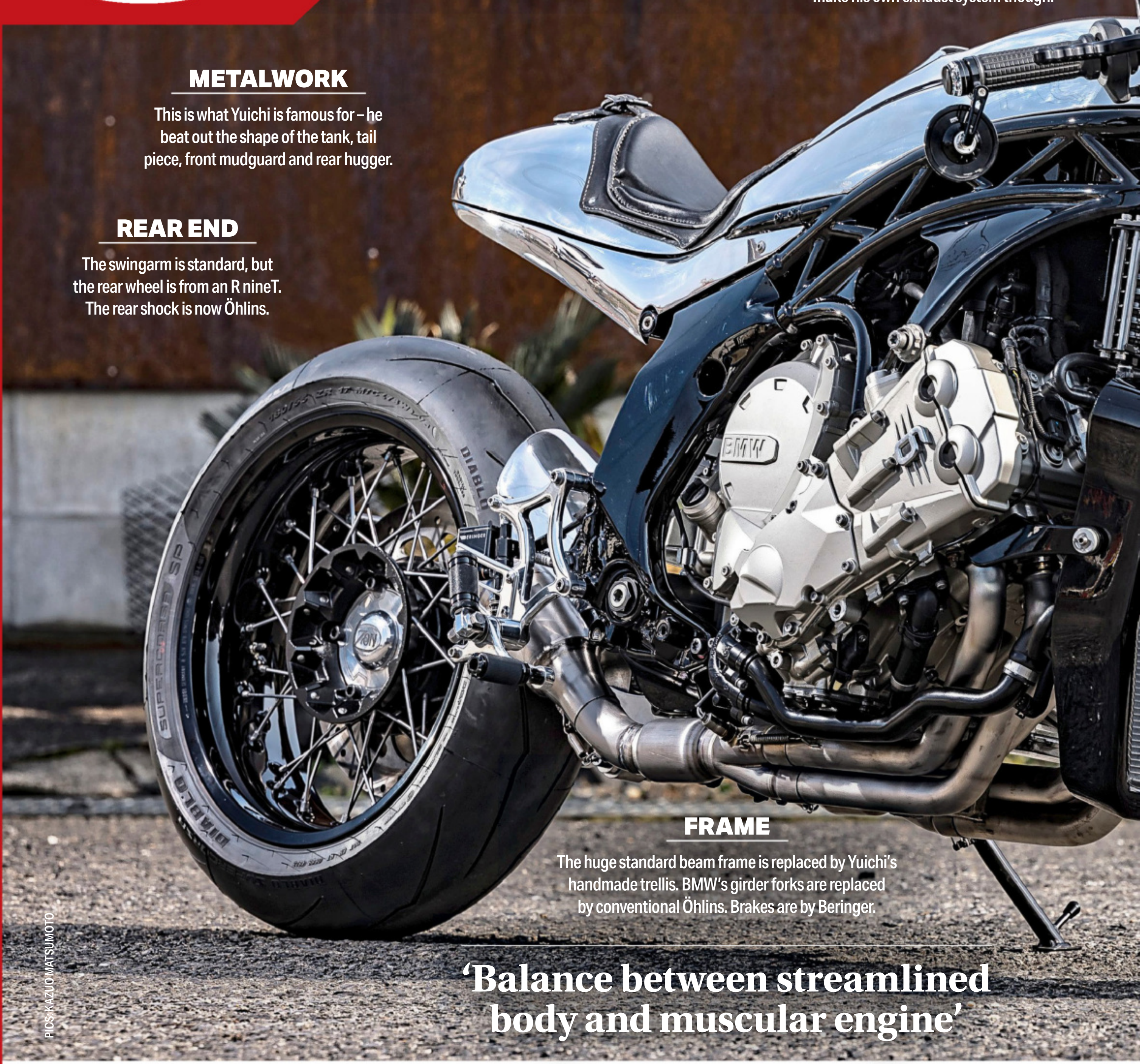
Yuichi wisely left the 1649cc inline six-cylinder motor alone – at 160bhp it hardly needed more power. He did make his own exhaust system though.

METALWORK

This is what Yuichi is famous for – he beat out the shape of the tank, tail piece, front mudguard and rear hugger.

REAR END

The swingarm is standard, but the rear wheel is from an R nineT. The rear shock is now Öhlins.



FRAME

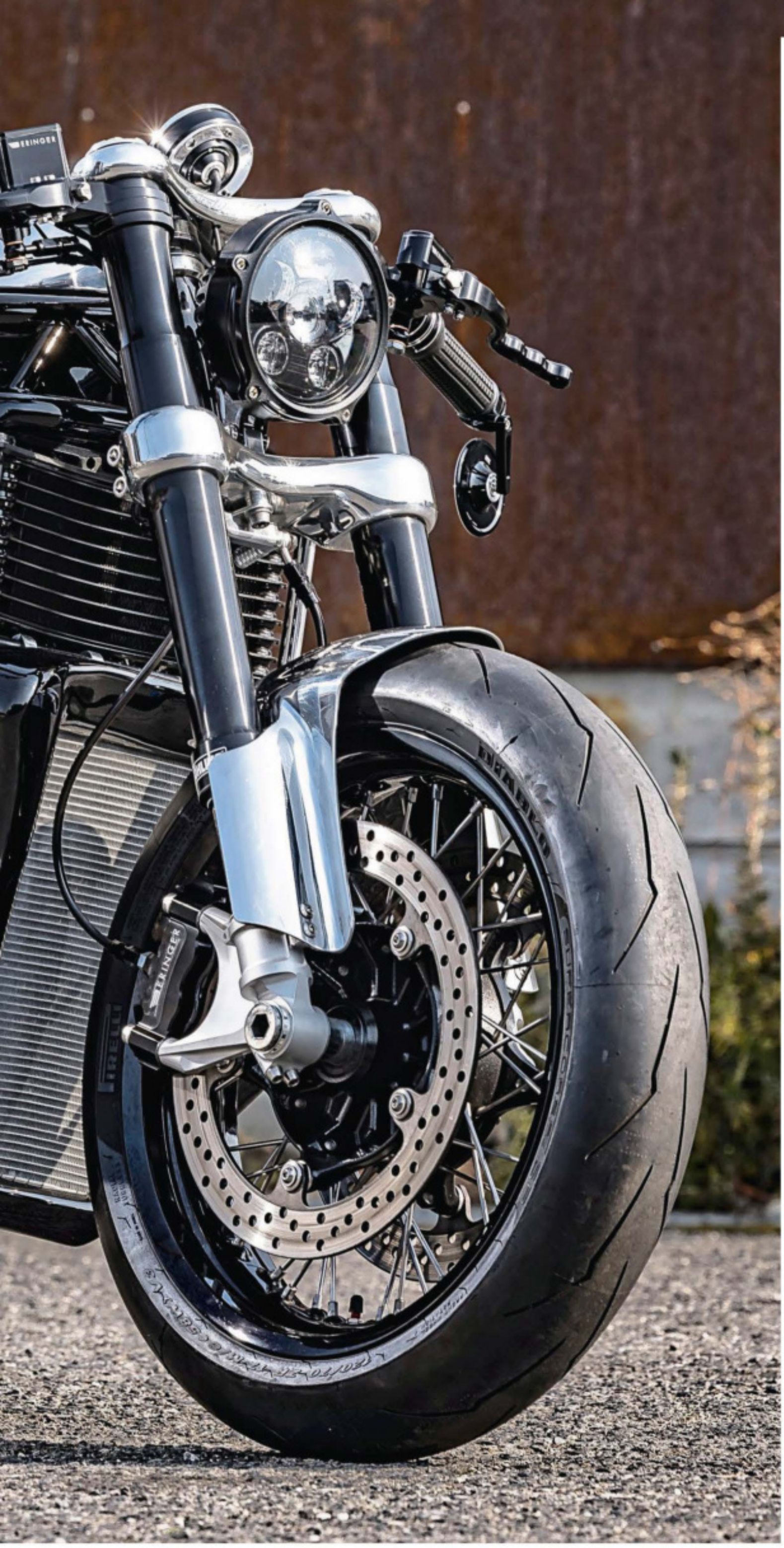
The huge standard beam frame is replaced by Yuichi's handmade trellis. BMW's girder forks are replaced by conventional Öhlins. Brakes are by Beringer.

> 'Balance between streamlined body and muscular engine'

PICS: KAZUO MATSUMOTO

Six Maniac

Transforming the six-cylinder **K1600GTL** into a café racer is difficult enough. Turning it into one that looks this good is mind-frazzling



There are good reasons why only a handful of the world's looniest custom builders have tried to customise BMW's K1600GTL tourer. For a start it's colossal – 348kg, 2.5m long, and powered by a 1649cc six-cylinder motor. The swingarm is almost a metre long and the radiator is the size of a Tesco crate. You can strip off as much plastic as you like but the result will never be anything less than vast.

Then there's the electronic complexity. Customisers hate this because it makes it horribly difficult to chop the bike about – remove one component connected to the CAN bus (the high-tech wiring loom) and the ECU goes apeshit, spraying warning lights across the dash or even refusing to work at all. And the K1600GTL is as complex as they come, with a 10in TFT and every electronic delicacy BMW can throw at it.

Despite all this, Yuichi Yoshizawa from CW Zon still went ahead. 'I've worked on BMWs a few times before, so I wasn't worried,' he tells *Bike* from his Japanese workshop. 'The customer asked us to create a custom bike that would make the most of the six-cylinder engine, so of course I said yes.'

Once all the plastics were stripped off, Yuichi ditched the standard beam frame which distracted from the engine. He sliced the beam above the swingarm pivot plate and threw the rest in the bin along with the Duolever front end. He then used a jig to give him the engine mount points for his new frame and fabricated a trellis that sweeps over the engine. Öhlins forks and custom yokes replace BM's girder system.

Above the frame is Yuichi's handmade tank and tail. Despite looking like a piece of sculpture, this was one of his easier jobs thanks to 15 years of experience in metal bending – he's now won more than 50 custom awards around the world.

'To turn the K1600 into a café racer, my main problems were in fact the extremely large radiator and the huge amount of wiring, as well as the unnecessary long swingarm,' he says. 'But once we had chopped up the thick main frame and changed the balance, it already looked better.

'We wanted a balance between the streamlined body and the muscular engine. Some people may not know that this touring bike actually has a six-cylinder engine because of all the cowling – they can see the engine more clearly with this café racer.'

Astonishingly, the bike only took four months to build. 'The test ride was good fun,' says Yuichi. 'I could feel the unique sound of the powerful six-cylinder engine and the bike was top-notch in terms of stopping and turning.'

Forget TFTs and the like. This, every day

[**NEW BIKES**]

The onslaught

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SUSPENSION

43mm KYB forks with rebound adjustment and 184mm of travel. Rear shock is KYB, with preload and rebound adjustment.

ROUND BITS

Front wheel is 19in, rear is 17in. There's also a cast-wheel version that's £200 cheaper. 320mm discs at the front with radial J.Juan calipers.

This new Morbidelli T1002VX is launching a three-pronged attack on the adventure market. Firstly, you get heaps as standard: fancy three-part aluminium luggage, tyre pressure monitors, adjustable screen, heated seat and grips, bash plate, backlit switchgear, cruise control, crash bars, main stand and cornering ABS. Secondly, it's a V-twin, which differentiates it from the hordes of identikit parallel twins. And thirdly, it costs £8699.

To put that price into perspective, a similarly specced Suzuki V-Strom 1050 costs £15,189, a BMW F800GS with plastic luggage is £12,700 and an equivalent F900GS with no luggage would set you back £15,687. Price-wise, the only competition are other Chinese-made adventure bikes such as the Voge DS900X at £8889.

We first showed you it in the March 2023 issue when it was going to be badged MBP. Now it's here as a Morbidelli. Shared with the firm's C1002V cruiser, the 997cc V-twin was developed by QJMotor, who own Morbidelli, Benelli and Keeway. It doesn't appear a rip-off of any existing motor – the engine dimensions and single overhead cam aren't shared by any mainstream bike we know of. Power is claimed to be 88bhp at 7750rpm, with torque of 70 lb.ft at 5250rpm.

'We're going to sell a good few of these,' says Rod Geskell from importer MotoGB. 'When the Voge DS900X came in we shifted 500 in two months and have had to order another 2000. The T1002VX might not do that well, but it's got something different

PICS: MORBIDELLI

continues

ELECTRONICS

Cornering ABS, traction control, four rider modes, 7in TFT screen, backlit switchgear – all the gubbins you'd expect on a BMW or KTM costing twice as much.

IT'S A BIG 'UN

The downside of all the extras is the weight: at 265kg it's a big ol' thing.

ENGINE

997cc water-cooled V-twin with single overhead cams making a claimed 88bhp. Morbidelli owners QJMotor obviously have a thing for V-twins – they built one for the new Morini 3½, too.

Looks big and chunky. And angry, too

A few BMW cues in there

MORBIDELLI

Doesn't scrimp on spec and it all comes as standard

about it – there aren't many V-twin adventure bikes out there.

'The spec is impressive too. We had to fully load it to compete with the Voge but keep the price down, too. £8699 feels like exceptional value for money, and will mean a lot of buyers won't have to go down the PCP route – they can actually own it.'

Rod also rates the build quality. 'The fit and finish is good – it feels well screwed together. The aluminium luggage feels solid. I think people are switching on to the fact that, yes, 10 years ago, Chinese bikes were cheap and nasty and wouldn't last a winter, but now they're not. In terms of quality, electrics, TFTs, materials… they're as good as anything, except they're made with cheaper labour so cost less.'

Morbidelli expect bikes to be in showrooms by the end of April.

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Hands down, it has feet-forward attitude

ENGINE

The XDiavel is the only cruiser able to claim its motor is evolved from a MotoGP bike. The 166bhp V4 has a counter-rotating crankshaft, twin pulse firing order and – remarkably –37,000-mile valve check intervals.

BRAKES

Ducati say the 330mm discs and Brembo Stylema calipers give a peak deceleration of 11.5m/s/s, which isn't far off that of a race bike. Admittedly, they are a bit shorter than the XDiavel.

SWINGARM

Still a single-sider, thank goodness, which is the only way to show off the five-star rear wheel and potty 240/45 tyre.

[NEW BIKES]

MotoGP cruiser

Ducati's **XDiavel** returns with a 166bhp V4 motor and lovely comfy saddle

The old XDiavel was always one of those bikes that we assumed had compromising photos of Ducati's CEO stashed away. How else could you explain its continued presence in the line-up? It didn't sell well and its feet forward, cruiser-esque styling seemed out of kilter with the rest of Ducati's all-action range.

So, when the XDiavel quietly disappeared in 2023 we thought that was it. Mr Domenicali had got his incriminating pictures back and the wily old cruiser bit the dust. But no. Here it is again with a V4 engine, a fresh look and a new emphasis on 'medium range touring'.

The old bike's 1262cc V-twin motor is replaced by the V4 from the latest Multistrada, giving it 166bhp at 10,750rpm and 93 lb.ft of torque – enough to make it all but invincible away from the lights even if you don't bother engaging the launch control. Ducati say it will do 0-62mph in less than three seconds and we believe them.

The new engine is lighter too, helping keep the XDiavel's weight down to 229kg (6kg lighter than the old bike and nearly 100kg lighter than Triumph's Rocket 3), and like the Multistrada shuts down the rear cylinders when dawdling to save fuel and reduce heat.

But perhaps more significant is the shift towards comfort. The 770mm-high saddle is thicker than before, handlebars are set back and lowered even more than the old bike's, and new rear suspension with 25mm more wheel travel should increase ride quality. The pillion saddle is also miles bigger – 30 per cent wider and 50 per cent longer. The rear grab handle comes as standard.

You can also spec it with 48-litre panniers (colour-matched panels also available), a passenger backrest and integrated side handles. There's also a touring screen.

Prices are yet to be announced, but will almost certainly be saltier than a Bonneville lake bed. The standard Diavel (with the pegs in the right place and normal bars) costs £24,167 so expect at least that when bikes hit showrooms in May.

> 'Fresh look and emphasis on 'medium range touring''

PICS: DUCATI

ENGINE

A 921cc, 161bhp, four-cylinder screamer designed by MV Agusta and built in China.

SUSPENSION

All Marzocchi like the high-end MVs, but built under licence by QJMotor in China.

CHASSIS

Few details available, but the frame (a mix of aluminium beam and steel trellis) looks similar to the MV Brutale 1000RS's.

[**NEW BIKES**]

Gunning for the R9

New **QJMotor SRK1000RR** aims to categorically eclipse Yamaha's R9 for similar money

There's been talk of a full-on Chinese superbike for years, but these exclusive shots of QJMotor's SRK1000RR production prototype show that the finished article is not far away – insiders say it will go on sale in China by mid-2025, topping QJMotor's range of 13 sportsbikes (see box).

The new flagship is powered by a 921cc inline four-cylinder engine that's claimed to make 161bhp at 13,600rpm and 66 lb.ft of torque at 11,000rpm (Yamaha's three cylinder R9: 117bhp; 69 lb.ft). Though QJMotor are capable of designing their own engines (see new Morbidelli, page 12), this one is the result of a deal with MV Agusta from 2020. That arrangement fell apart when KTM bought a stake in MV in 2022, but QJ kept the rights to build MV's 921cc design that was first seen in the Italian firm's Concept 921S. It's essentially MV's 205bhp, 998cc four-cylinder monster with a fractionally smaller bore and stroke.

There are other MV links, too. The SRK was styled by C-Creative, the studio owned by ex-MV boss Giovanni Castiglioni and run by one-time MV design chief Adrian Morton alongside his former MV colleague Paolo Bianchi. They had familiar underpinnings to work from, as the SRK's frame appears identical to that of the MV Brutale 1000RS, complete with its single-sided swingarm. Suspension is by Marzocchi, which is no great surprise as QJMotor have a deal with the Italian brand to make their suspension for the Chinese market.

The SRK's price has not been announced but it's likely to be closer to the R9's £12,250 than the MV F3R's £16,900.

QJMotor make 13 sportsbikes?

» They do indeed. The range consists of a 125, three 250s, two 400s, a 450, two 500s, a 550, two 600s, and an 800. Then there's the SRK1000RR and two other forthcoming sportsbikes based on detuned versions of its 921cc engine. QJMotor have a Moto2 and World Supersport team, too. Their line-up of 125cc-plus motorcycles (not scoots) numbers 81. One suspects the company bought Benelli in 2005 and Morbidelli in 2024 with loose change.

SRK 125 R

SRK 250 RS

SRK 250 RC

SRK 25 R

SRK 400 RS

SRK 400 RR

SRK 450 RR

SRK 500 RC

SRK 500 RC

SRK 550 RR

SRK 600 RS

SRK 600 RC

SRK 800 RR

SRK 921 RR

SU 9

SRK 1000 RR

PICS: QJMOTOR

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[**NEW BIKES**]

Repsol out, sp

Honda's new technical director tells *Bike* why the Castrol-sponsored **RC213V** has jumped up MotoGP's pecking order

After a dismal 2024 when Honda's two factory riders came last and second last in the championship, things are looking up for the Honda Racing Corporation. Factory rider Joan Mir was running seventh on the new RC213V in the first MotoGP race of 2025 before lobbing it, while Johann Zarco finished seventh on the LCR Honda and Luca Marini came 12th on the other factory bike. By recent standards, that's miraculously good. So, what's happened aside from Repsol clearing off after 30 years and letting Castrol paint the bikes?

'The 2025 bike has undergone a number of refinements, in particular in the torque delivery and in most of the electronic strategies of the traction control and wheelie control,' says the factory team's new technical director Romano Albesiano, who previously guided Aprilia from back-markers to race winners. 'This bike is a good base to develop performance consistently through a process of refinement.'

What those refinements mean is that Mir, Marini and Zarco can now get out of corners almost as well as the Ducatis. 'I've been told that the engine is smoother and more usable,' confirms TNT Sports' Neil Hodgson. 'It might not have the out-and-out brute horsepower [of the Ducatis] but it can get to its top speed much quicker than last year's bike.'

Besides the engine development, Honda have also beefed up their test team by bringing in three-time MotoGP winner Aleix Espargaro and MotoGP regular Takaaki Nakagami to hasten progress. 'Having a strong test team has become more and more important in recent years,' Romano tells *Bike*. 'Aleix is a very fast rider who can bring the bike to his limits – and this is crucial for the development. He is changing his attitude from pure racer to fast tester and is doing a great job.

'Nakagami is useful because of his familiarity with the bike [he spent six years at LCR Honda], the quality of his feedback and his speed. He has a lot of knowledge about how the bike has changed and evolved. Having a more global test team [Nakagami is based in Japan, Espargaro in Europe] also allows us to work with a more varied schedule.'

Romano spent 11 years at Aprilia, taking them from MotoGP newbies to four wins and regular top fives. So, is he trying to pull off a similar feat with Honda? 'The situation now is very different from Aprilia in those years,' he says. 'Aprilia was starting from scratch, with almost no experience in the category. With Honda HRC, everything is well established and they have a lot of data and processes that we can already take advantage of.

'We will discover our true level after four or five races. It will take time to return to the level that has always been usual for Honda but the process has started and we must be consistent and methodical. The potential is there...'

AKRAPOVIC
One HEART. Satu HATI.
MICHELIN
RCB
MITSUBA
ShinDengen
NGK
RK
Snap-on

CHASSIS

On the evidence of the first race, Honda have improved the front end, with Mir in particular able to fight with the leading group at the first GP by diving in on the brakes. Mind you, he did crash after losing the front...

36
Castrol
HONDA

All those wings and sticky-outy bits, but it's the engine that's better

PICS: HRC

eed in

ENGINE

1000cc liquid-cooled, four-stroke, DOHC V4 putting out an estimated 300bhp – lots, but still down on the Ducatis. The big change for 2025 is that it's easier to get the power down.

PAINT JOB

After 30 years of Repsol, factory Hondas are now in Castrol livery, though alas not in the traditional green, white and red of the LCR team.

NEW FRONT MICHELIN

Designed to handle the extra loads generated by the aero and ride height devices. Concessions mean Honda are allowed plenty of tyres for testing, which could bring the bike on in leaps and bounds.

CONCESSIONS

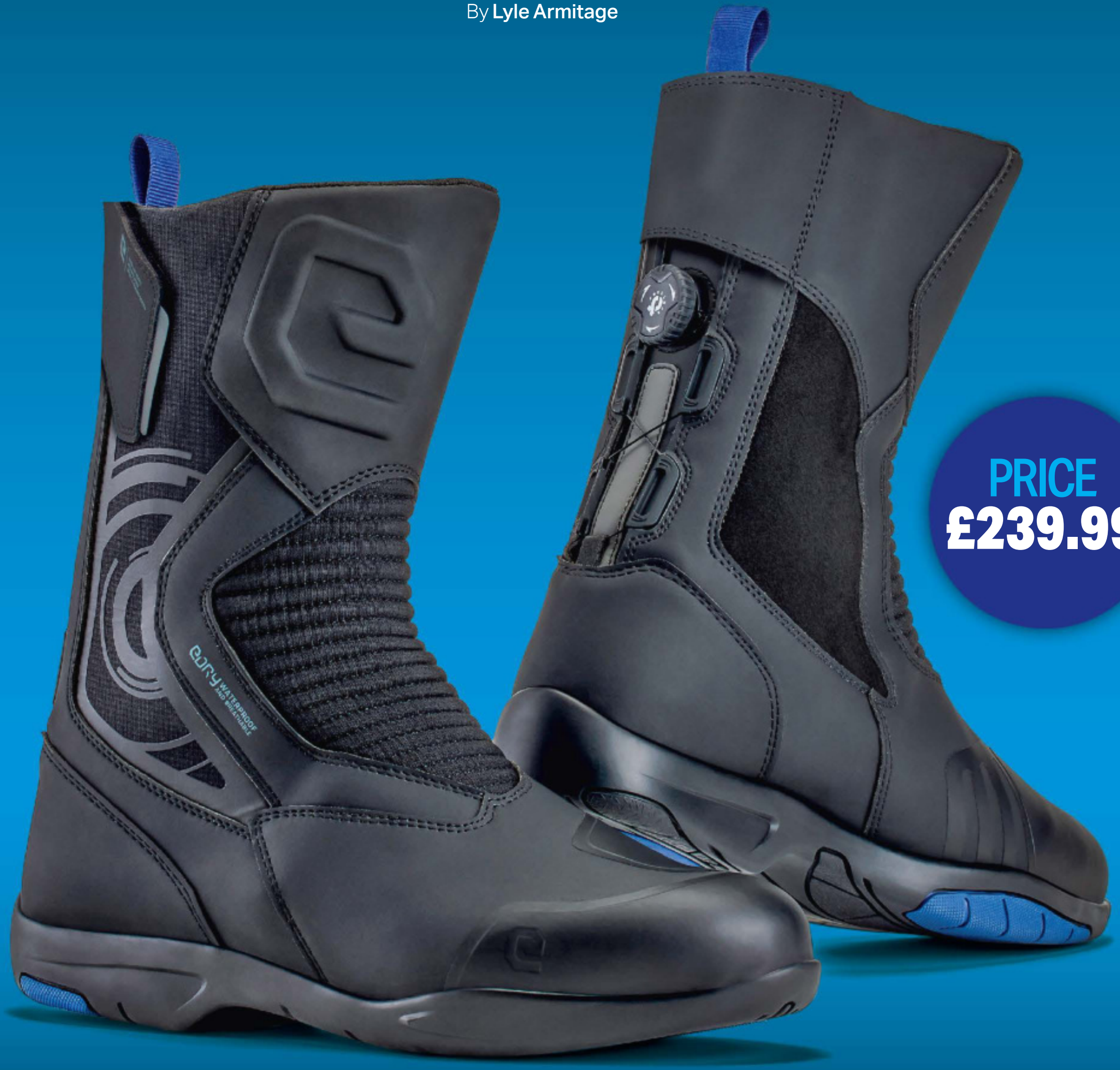
Because Honda did so badly last year, the team have the maximum concessions. This is a big deal – it means Honda can test as much as they like, where they like, and can change the engine throughout the season. Six wildcard entries, too.

> 'It will take time but the potential is there'

GET IN GEAR

The latest word in swanky riding gear, desirable bolt-ons and must-have goodies for your pride and joy

By **Lyle Armitage**



PRICE
£239.99

Eleveit Antelao WP

WHAT IS IT? New footwear for those who consume touring-flavoured confection. Made by relative bootmaking newcomers Eleveit (the Italian brand only started in 2018), the Antelao has all the gubbins you'd expect being breathable, waterproof, with a light microfibre construction and micrometric closure on the back.

WHAT DO WE LIKE? Elegant, simple design with pops of colour – nice. We're growing to like spinny-wheel closures – they make boots easy to put on and give a just-so fit. These look ideal all-weather boots: breathable and light for hot days, warm and dry when it's miserable. No socks on the radiator after a ride. Lovely.

HOW MUCH AND WHERE FROM? £239.99 **eleveit.it/en**

New stuff

Clobber for you and your motorcycle

» Merlin Burslem Eco

WHAT IS IT? Retro-style jacket with traditional looks, but constructed from 100 per cent recycled materials. Laminated with AquaSeal+ membrane and with a water-repellent coating on the outside, for complete weather-beating ability. It's CE AA certified and includes D3O armour at the elbow and shoulder.

WHAT DO WE LIKE? I thought a fully recycled jacket would feel like it's made out of old bottles – stiff and plasticky. But editor Mike has one on test (he's in it on p102) and it feels and looks like any other good-quality jacket. He describes it with words like 'snug', 'comfy' and 'get off, it's mine' so it must be decent. This is definitely the way forward with bike kit if the quality achievable with recycled material is this good.

HOW MUCH AND WHERE FROM?
£349.99 **merlinbikegear.shop**

PRICE
£349.99

FROM
£319.99

« Shark OXO helmet

WHAT IS IT? The 180° flip-front helmet, where the entire chin and visor swings out the way round the back, was pioneered by Shark. This latest version of their P/J approved helmet follows the popular Evoline series and converts from full-face to jet at the mere swipe of a hand. The washable interior is made from recycled material, too.

WHAT DO WE LIKE? You'd expect a helmet with so many moving parts to look clunky, but the OXO still has a very normal look to it. Like how it can be a full-face for tearing about, complete with sun visor, but a jet-style lid for swanning through town and smiling at people. Lots of different colours and designs, and lots of options for coloured visors to suit the scheme (or the rest of your kit). I think it's cool.

HOW MUCH AND WHERE FROM?
£319.99 **nevis.uk.com**

» Innovv RC6 camera and radar system

WHAT IS IT? A pair of front and rear cameras with radar, the set-up gives blind-spot detection and advance warning of approaching hazards, as well as recording your fabulous riding. Waterproof to something called IP67 and has 2k resolution.

WHAT DO WE LIKE? The cameras are small and discreet, and it would seem they have great range and clarity as well as decent battery life. If you're the sort of person who enjoys recording where they've been (or having a bit of evidence in case of a not-your-fault prang), why wouldn't you also get the benefits of blind spot and hazard warnings?

HOW MUCH AND WHERE FROM?
£322.99 **innovv.com**

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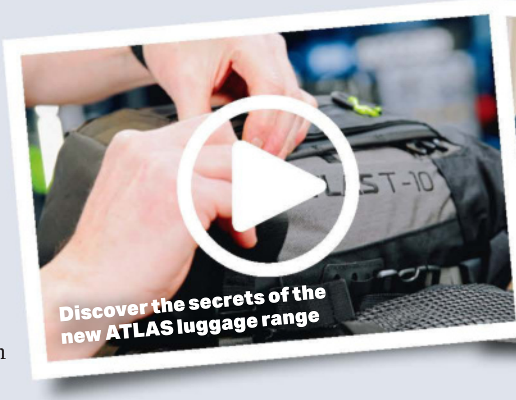
'Making life on bikes better'

New MCN video series takes you behind the scenes at Witney's **Oxford Products**



Discover the secrets of the new ATLAS luggage range

Hear from the British teams behind the kit

If you've owned or ridden a motorcycle in the past 50 years, then it's a safe bet to say that you've heard of Oxford Products. And we'd double down on that to say that you've owned something from the range, be it luggage, clothing, security or electronics. What you may not know, is that every single one of the 10,000+ products in the current catalogue has been designed and developed in the company's HQ in Witney, Oxfordshire.

The Oxford story began back in 1973 with the distribution of a basic top box, but the firm has since grown to become a major force in the riding kit and motorcycle accessories market. As a brand, Oxford is synonymous with practical, affordable and innovative biking solutions, and a new video series produced in partnership with the world's leading authority on motorcycling, MCN, goes behind the scenes to discover the development that's gone into the key products at the forefront of their most important 2025 collections.

In this exclusive new four-part video series, which will air weekly on MCN's YouTube channel, the series gets the inside line on the firm's Atlas luggage range; their Stormland adventure suit; Beast security range; and the firm's super-popular Hot Grips and Oximiser ranges.

Join MCN Product Specialist, Justin Hayzelden, as he delves into the story behind the products you use.

Episode 1: ATLAS luggage

This all-new modular luggage system builds on the hugely successful Lifetime Luggage and Aqua ranges to make it the most versatile luggage that Oxford Products has ever produced. At the core of the range are three tour packs, providing 10, 20 and 30 litres of load space respectively, which can be used independently or combined with each other for a custom set-up to suit any adventure. The key features across ATLAS are Fast Fit, Modular, Waterproof and Lifetime-guaranteed build quality.

Episode 2: Advanced Accessories

Hot Grips and Oximisers have been staple products of Oxford's for years, but the latest Pro versions have pushed the tech side, and performance, to the next level. Hot Grips now have a fully integrated operating system, with just a single button to control heat levels and switch between modes. They're independently thermistor controlled, which means they're always the same temperature, and have a battery saving mode should voltage drop for any reason. The new Oximiser range can charge, manage and condition both lithium and traditional lead acid batteries more effectively than ever helping your bike to start first time, every time.

Episode 3: Stormland

Oxford's latest range-topping adventure jacket has been designed with full weatherproofing in mind. The CE AA-certified jacket and pant combo uses a tri-laminate construction, consisting of an outer abrasion-resistant shell, waterproof membrane and tricot knit lining for comfort. A twin cuff system and removable neck gaiter have also been integrated to ensure that every gap is sealed.

Episode 4: Beast Security

When it comes to keeping your motorcycle safe, size is everything and the new Beast range includes some of the beefiest locks to have been developed by Oxford. The centrepiece lock hits the scales at a whopping 3.6kg, with the accompanying chain weighing it at 15.5kg. A lighter weight disc lock is also available for portable use, but they're all certified to Sold Secure Diamond Standard and designed to resist every kind of mechanical attack.

Step inside the incredible Witney HQ of Oxford Products

GO BEHIND THE SCENES
See the new four-part video series unfold at: YouTube.com/@motorcyclenewsdotcom

OXFORD

Bike Next month

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- » We take a peek inside HRC's secret warehouse
- » Helmet paint legend Aldo Drudi reveals all to Mat Oxley
- » Around Europe on an Enfield outfit (with a dog in the chair...)

June issue on sale 16th April

Howling 600s and hanging-off riding styles – both hot stuff 40 years ago

Arai
bike
Kawasaki

'Clapping my bloomin' freezing hands in agony – that's my most vivid memory'

From the archive

***Bike*: The voice of motorcycling since 1971**

The bleeding edge of bike design in 1985

1985 Kawasaki GPZ600R

40 years ago, Kawasaki started a whole new category for revvy, racy 600s. *Bike*'s **Roland Brown** recalls his first taste of the future

By **Roland Brown**

Cold hands. Clapping my bloomin' frozen hands in agony, after lapping the sunny but barely-above-zero Jarama circuit near Madrid in thin racing gloves. That's my most vivid memory of the launch of Kawasaki's GPZ600R, 40 years ago.

That's distinctly disrespectful to Kawasaki's hot new challenger of 1985. Because the GPZ600R wasn't merely a quick, sweet-handling four, and arguably the year's best middleweight. It was the model that kick-started the hugely popular 600cc sportsbike category.

Kawasaki were on a roll in 1985. The previous year's GPz900R (still with lower-case z back then) had restored the Big K to the top of the performance charts, where rivals included the firm's own GPz1100 and ZX750 Turbo. Also making its debut at Jarama was the GPz750R, essentially just a smaller-capacity Ninja. But the GPZ600R was a proper new model. As my report in *Bike*'s February '85 issue put it: 'The mini-Ninja takes the engine from the outstandingly successful GPz550, enhances it with the addition of a water-cooled, four-valve top end cribbed from the equally well-received GPz900R and adds a slick package of frame, cycle parts and styling.'

That 592cc, 16-valve inline four made a claimed 75bhp at 10,500rpm – a whole 10bhp up on the 39cc-smaller GPz550 unit. The 'perimeter' frame was similar to that of Yamaha's FJ1100, with box-section steel tubes running past the top of the engine each side, and another pair lower down. Air-assisted forks with anti-dive, a Uni-Trak monoshock, aluminium swingarm and 16in wheels all seemed very modern in 1985.

They all worked, too. The compact and racy GPZ was a lot of fun at Jarama, ripping down the straights enthusiastically provided I kept revs between six grand and the 11,000rpm redline, heading for a top speed of about 125mph. It was agile, pretty stable and had much more ground clearance than the GPz750R.

Ultimately, perhaps the fact that my abiding launch memory is of pain rather than performance is a reflection that the GPZ600R didn't make the impact that its groundbreaking layout promised – on me or the motorcycling public. Kawasaki's contender was kept off *Bike*'s front cover by Yamaha's FZ750 and utterly overshadowed by Suzuki's GSX-R750.

The GPZ600R had shown the potential of a sporty 16-valve, liquid-cooled inline four-cylinder middleweight. But it would take the arrival of Honda's CBR600F, two years later, to ignite the class that enlivened motorcycling for the next few decades. Bike

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Skills series goes live!

National Highways boost bikers' riding ability with new six-part **BikerTek** riding masterclass series

For many of us, this is the time of year when plans are made: which events to attend; when to squeeze in that foreign trip; which mates you want to drag along to the BSB at Cadwell. But it's also a perfect time to pick up some new skills so you can make this summer your smoothest, safest and most fun yet. That's where this new series of videos from MCN and BikerTek comes in, with expert riding instruction being provided by Rapid Training.

"A lot of riders pass their test and then never do any further coaching" says Giles Lamb from Rapid Training, "We find that when riders invest in themselves, the skills they learn quickly transform their riding, making them safer and faster. The response is always the same: a big grin. What's not to like about having more fun on your bike?"

There are six videos in the new series, each designed to help all riders improve their skills. "The first is about reading the road," says Giles, who spent over half his career in the police as a motorcyclist riding marked and unmarked bikes, before joining Rapid.

"Great riders make everything look easy – gliding into every bend at the right speed, overtaking effortlessly and never being surprised by anything. Obviously, they're doing a lot of things right, but the bedrock of all their techniques is reading the road. So that's where the new series starts."

After that, the videos cover braking, junctions, overtaking, steering techniques, and throttle control. "A lot of these subjects sound simple," says Giles. "But to become a great rider you need to understand the nuances of each one."

Watch the series now at bikertek.co.uk.

1 Reading the road

The bedrock of all road riding skills. The better you are at reading the road, the faster and safer you are. The video explains how to use limit points to improve your cornering, how to scan without getting information overload, and how to use peripheral vision.

2 Braking

The team uses an airfield to prove why your front brake is more effective than the rear, before heading out onto the road to explore how braking interacts with steering, when to use the back brake and why expert riders tend to use their brakes more, not less.

3 Overtaking

Light, fast and slim, motorcycles are overtaking weapons. But they can get us into trouble. Episode 3 highlights the overtaking risks to avoid, and explains the techniques that could revolutionise your overtaking, making overtakes both safer and easier.

4 Junctions

Car drivers often cause bikers problems at junctions, but we don't always help ourselves. Learn what to look for, understand why you may not be seen, what to do about modern cars' wide A-pillars and how you can make yourself more visible.

5 Steering

Most of us know about counter-steering, but that's just the start. Learn how long your steering input should be, why what you do with your lower body has such an effect on the steering, and how keeping your arms loose can dramatically improve cornering.

6 Throttle control

The throttle does so much more than just change your speed. This episode shows how it can improve your cornering – increasing front end grip and feel going into corners, balancing the bike mid-corner, and creating masses of grip and confidence coming out.

Write Off

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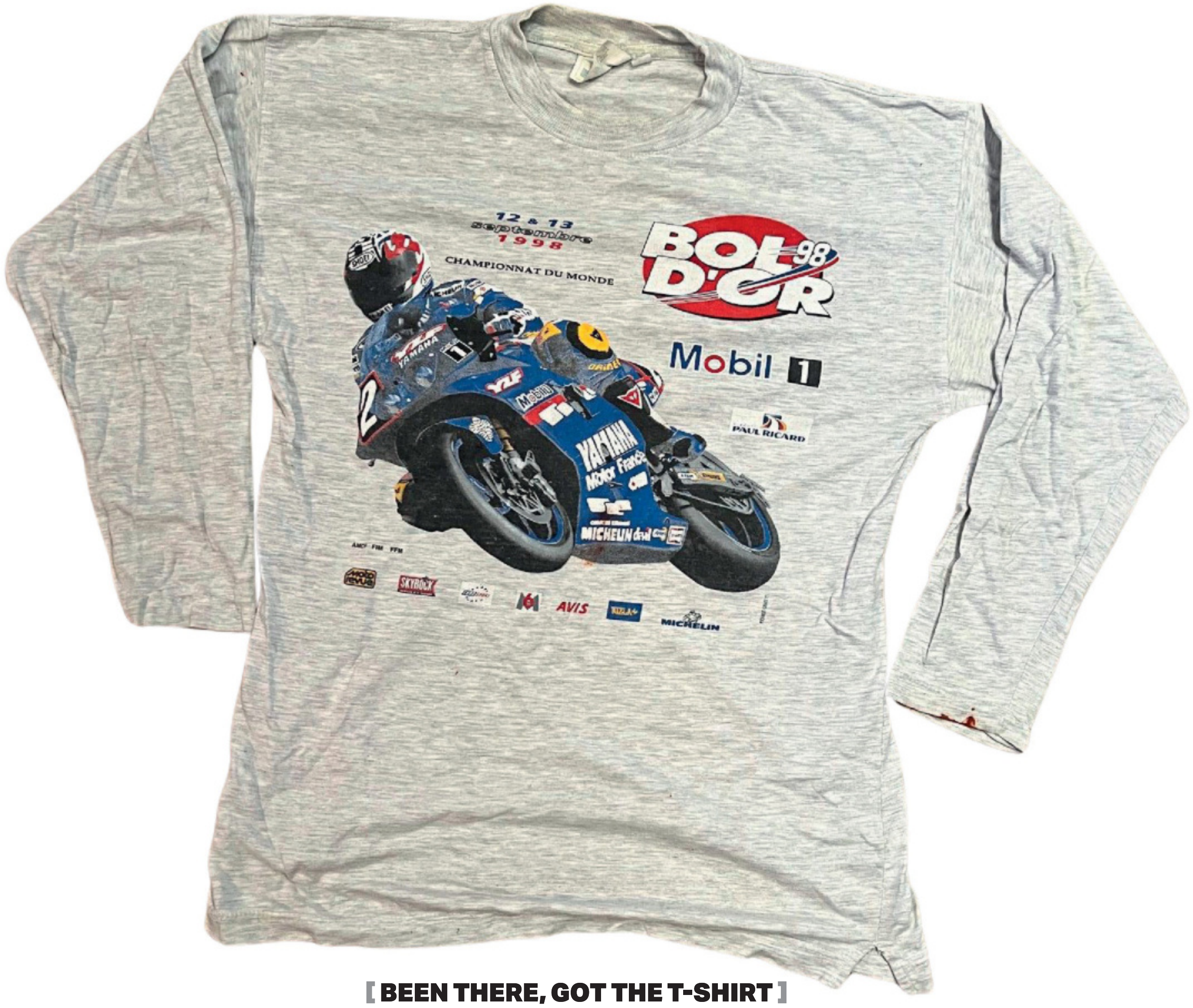

[**BEEN THERE, GOT THE T-SHIRT**]

'Parting panniers on motorway, overloaded Thundercat... epic Bol d'Or'

Having a new year tidy up, I found my long-sleeved T-shirt from the 1998 Bol d'Or. In the 1980s a bunch of us, inspired by articles about Team Bike, regularly rode to the Bol, but as time passed we stopped going. Coming back to biking after a few years, I attended the 'last' Bol at Paul Ricard with my friend Simon. It was eventful – Simon's panniers parted company with his Ducati 748 on the motorway so I ended up with his luggage and mine on my overloaded Thundercat. Another ex-pat who came with us ran out of petrol, got lost overnight in a thunderstorm and headed home early... and was nicked for speeding. The race was epic; Simon had blagged paddock passes and enjoyed swanning around the pits. **Chris Hoskins**

IF YOU'VE GOT AN OLD T-SHIRT LIKE CHRIS' AND FANCY SEEING IT IN *BIKE*, TAKE A PICTURE OF THE *WHOLE* SHIRT, ARMS INCLUDED, AND EMAIL IT TO THE ADDRESS AT THE TOP OF THE PAGE. IF WE PUBLISH IT WE'LL SEND YOU A NEW T-SHIRT.

[STAR LETTER]

'Brilliant Browning'

Thank you, thank you, thank you. At last someone has publicly recognised the brilliance of Birmingham's best, Arthur Browning. Some years ago another journal did a 'best all-rounder' thing and gave it to some other guy, totally ignoring Arthur's never-ending versatility.

A fellow Midlander, Arthur was a regular participant in every form of the sport and his range of skills became almost taken for granted. John Westlake's words (*Bike*, March) finally do justice to a man who, if he had taken up cricket, would have out-sobersed Sobers. Didn't know about the Commando, though.

Peter Hooper

Arthur enjoying his long-overdue recognition

EACH MONTH WE GIVE AWAY A CABERG DUKE II HELMET AND A YEAR'S SUBSCRIPTION TO *BIKE* FOR THE MONTH'S STAR LETTER. ON YOUR MARKS

Best bobber

Mick Scott has topped the lot with his Triumph bobber (*Bike*, March). The single carb, mudguards, flared pipe, etc, all create a symmetry not present in a lot of similar bikes.

The best feature in my eyes though is the superb oil tank. Genius.

He should be very proud to have created such a superb machine.

David Thomas, Swansea

Graphic joy

Just received my subscription copy of the April issue, and what a joy. As a retired engineer, I miss the generation and analysis of data by graphs. Well, you certainly slaked my thirst!

The two articles (*The Rise of Ducati* and on the effects of traction control electronics on a wet circuit) were well researched and interesting to read.

I'm looking forward to the next spreadsheet special.

Colin Winslett

Viva Ducati

I am a Ducati addict. There, I said it. I bought my first in 1979 – an 860 GT modified to look like a 750 Sport. It rattled (loudly), owing to a failing crankshaft main bearing and, for the time, a ubiquitous failed big end.

I bought it cheap and within a month had rebuilt it. I was hooked – that big 90° V-twin melted my heart – and in the following May I mortgaged myself to the hilt and bought a black and gold 900SS.

Mick's bobber's a bit of oil-right – it's hard to disagree with David

Here we are 45 years later and I own three Ducatis: a 996 Biposto; a Monster 1200S; and an 851 SP3 that I love. Although, being retired, over 6ft tall and not as slim as I used to be, it is a challenge to ride comfortably.

So, 34 years after my 851 SP (888cc) was built, I see Ducati are again making a 890cc twin developing 120bhp. Pretty much identical. I just wonder if any of the new Panigale V2s will still be going in 34 years having covered 146,000km?

It's hard to believe, but true. People don't believe me when I say the mileage is +100k. Viva Ducati.

Peter Wills

Heroes? Not for me

I don't think Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman should have been anywhere near the list of 100 years of heroes (*Bike*, March). They were given their bikes, and had a support truck, a film crew and plenty of money.

In 1987 a friend and I worked very hard for six months to save up and buy a Kawasaki trail bike and an old Land Rover to go overland from London to Kenya. If anything went wrong we had to sort it ourselves. No satellite telephone to call home daily, either.

Long Way Round gave the impression you need money and support for trips like this – you don't. To include two privileged actors on the same page as Arthur Browning denigrates his achievements.

Simon Jackson, London

The choices in the feature were made by individuals, and Steve's two-wheeled life has been inspired by the duo. He's also a Star Wars obsessive and enjoys a 'comic con'. Make of that what you will. MA

Same again? If only...

While looking through my old *Bike* magazines (I started buying *Bike* when it was bimonthly and cost 50p), I found this poster (right). Could you imagine a mainstream newspaper running such a competition today?

Peter Shutler

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Simon says go… so we did

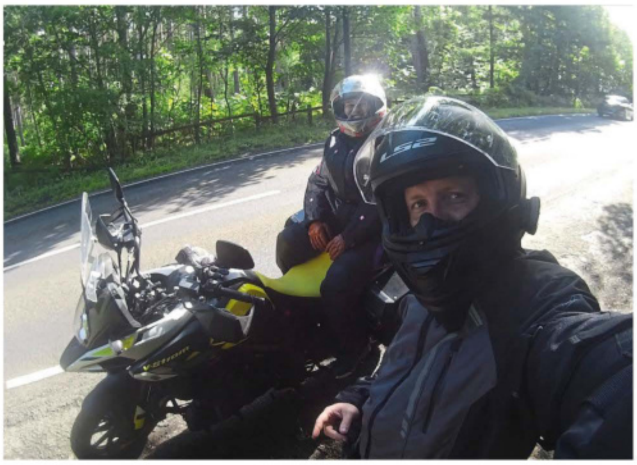
I've loved bikes since I was a child, much to my mother's dismay. But since reading Simon Weir's article on seeing the world (*Bike*, July, 2024), I have bought my first adventure bike and read every Adventure article.

Trading in my 1998 Honda VFR800 for a Suzuki DL1000 V-Strom (I have short legs so couldn't reach the floor on anything else), I set my sights on viewing the UK for a start. I then set off on my first 'adventure'.

With my trusted backpack (she prefers that term to pillion), we rode the best 250 miles in Northumberland – the coast, the country, and braving the Kielder Forest off-road track. We're planning a few more, as well as attending the ABR festival in June.

To mimic Simon's words: 'Book the time off now, decide where to go later – the main thing is to go.'

Robert Pugh



Robert and his 'backpack' – proving height is no obstacle to an adventure

Still searching

Thanks for the sports tourers test (*Bike*, April). I was keen to find out what these would be like as I've been looking for a 1000cc sports tourer for a long time, but the Kawasaki Ninja SX never really appealed due to the smallish tank, plus no top box or centrestand. I don't really like the looks, either.

Unfortunately, the test didn't really give much detail on the practical aspects of what these bikes would really be like as a sports tourer – tank range, luggage, practicality, etc.

Although, the information we did get was helpful. I'm still looking for the perfect 1000cc sports tourer…

Mark Scrivener, Huddersfield

Pointless tech

The group test of the Ducati Multistrada V4 Rally, Triumph Tiger 1200 Rally Explorer and BMW R1300GS Adventure (*Bike*, March) made me wonder how pointless most of the equipment is on these bikes.

Firstly, no one with any sense, if they had spent up to £28,000, would take them off-road for fear of damaging them. Also, who needs lowering suspension when you come to a standstill? Just buy the correct-height bike in the first place.

And do you really need radar cruise control? That should be down to the rider concentrating properly.

My shortlist would be Ducati Multistrada V2 (basic model with just heated grips), Triumph Tiger Sport 800, and the Honda Transalp (again, I would buy as basic as possible).

Nigel Cousins

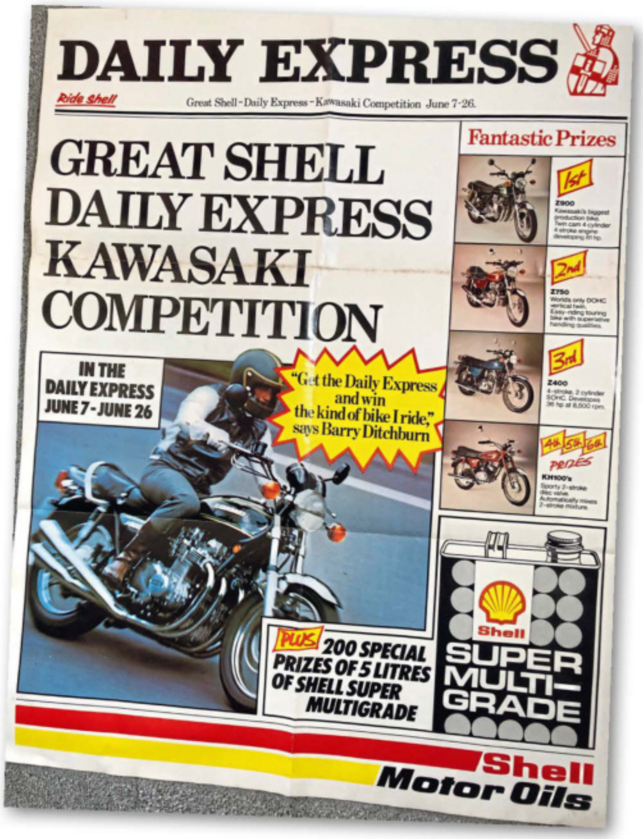
That's what you call VFM

Paddling around the supermarket, daydreaming about Moto Guzzis, and we pass the news stand. Ooh look, the latest *Bike* – it's in the trolley.

My other half chunters under her breath about the price. I've read your mag for years, so when I get home I dig out some old copies and engage full 'dull man' mode. And would you look at that: today's *Bike* has as many editorial pages as 20 years ago, but when you apply inflation to what it cost two decades back it's a quid or so cheaper than it should be. Maybe I should subscribe and save even more.

Terry Johnson

No doom and gloom in sight. If only today's front pages were the same



DAILY EXPRESS

Ride Shell

Great Shell - Daily Express - Kawasaki Competition June 7-26.

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"Get the Daily Express and win the kind of bike I ride," says Barry Ditchburn

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Tortoise *versus* Hare

The **Honda NT1100** and **BMW S1000XR** tackle sports touring at different speeds – but which is best for a dash round north Wales?

A4086 between the Llanberis Pass and Capel Curig. Oh yes

By **Martin Fitz-Gibbons**
Photography **Jason Critchell**

Jagged shards of rock burst free from towering mountains, trying to pierce the sky. Vast lakes, carved into the landscape by epic glaciers tens of thousands of years ago, sparkle and shimmer under the low afternoon sun. Dizzying drops, bucolic vistas and sinuous strips of empty road delicately thread these patchwork worlds together.

Snowdonia has the lot. In fact, north Wales is such a breathtaking place to ride that it self-selects as our destination now that spring has sprung. We're heading west for three days and two nights of sports-touring idyll.

In the 'hare' corner is BMW's S1000XR, a jacked-up superbike with more high-tech tricks than Penn & Teller, prodigious power and a flashy race-rep paint job. And in the 'tortoise' corner is Honda's NT1100, an approachable everyday all-rounder carved from pure modesty, complete with mutated maxi-scoot styling and a mature palette of beige, blue or black.

The two bikes sit at opposite ends of the sports-tourer spectrum, though both share a smidge of adventure-bike influence, and both promise to be the ideal platform from which to enjoy a midweek, cross-country getaway.

Let's get ready to trundle

Before romping round Wales comes the small matter of getting there. The first few hours of multi-lane mile munching pass with effortless ease aboard the NT1100. Well, effortless once I've sorted out the screen. It's one of the parts that's been 'upgraded' for 2025, Honda claiming its height-adjustment system 'can now be operated one-handed by the rider from a seated position'. Leaving *Bike*'s palatial Peterborough nerve centre, I have the screen set to its tallest height, expecting to be cosseted in a cocoon of calm. Instead, I get blurred eyeballs and battered eardrums courtesy of brutal buffeting. By the first roundabout – less than a mile from home – my left hand reaches for this new-fangled height adjuster. No joy. In the end I have to set the cruise control, stand up, lean forward and reach over with both hands just to drop the screen down to the middle of its range. Shall we start over again?

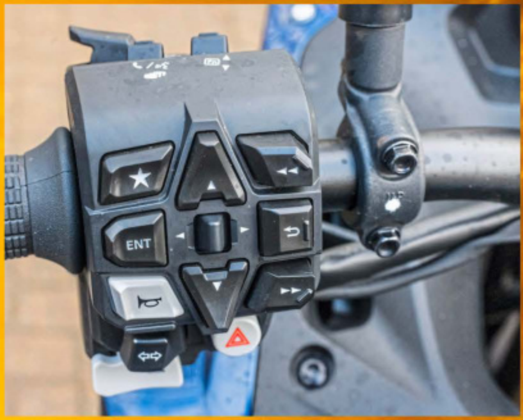
Now the NT begins to welcome me like a roaring fire in an old pub. Its enlarged seat is deep, wide and comfortable. Ergonomics are nicely balanced, causing no stresses or strains in knees, wrists or back. And the 1084cc parallel twin grumbles away softly, pulsing politely from relaxed revs. Shared with the Africa Twin, it's a long-stroke design so isn't meant to be worked hard. The redline's at just 8000rpm, peak torque comes down at 5500rpm, but in practice you find yourself riding around at even lower revs.

In part that's down to this bike's Dual Clutch Transmission. Honda have been updating and improving their beloved self-shifting auto gearbox for 15 years, and on the latest NT it now listens to a new lean-sensing IMU. This means it shouldn't try to do anything daft such as change gear while you're cranked over. In default 'Drive' mode it's still keen to shift gears early – you can find yourself in fifth at just 30mph. But switching to 'S3', the sportiest of three sports settings, revs are held for longer, making it feel less like a two-wheeled fuel-saving algorithm and more like a normal bike.

Now we're cooking. Which reminds me – let's fire up the standard-fit heated grips. Sixteen buttons on the left cluster, another half-dozen on the right… but none marked 'heated grips'. Turns out you need to press 'Fn' (right forefinger), then a different up/down toggle (left forefinger) to turn them on. Of course you do. Silly me.

Right then. With screen height set, DCT sorted and feeling regained in my fingers, now we're golden. The NT flows like warm Horlicks through congested Cambridgeshire A-roads, devours the M6 in a single gulp, and spits me out at the end of the M54 within sight of the Welsh border. More than a hundred miles of ease and efficiency, once those few early-morning wrinkles have been ironed out.

Above: the best bits of an Africa Twin and Deauville in one ace bundle



Right: someone, somewhere, gave this layout the green light

Below: golden evening light, mountain road, 168bhp S1000XR – quite a combo

'Open the throttle with intent and the XR gives you a glimpse of its implausible potency'

We stop for coffee, but road-testing new-boy Lewis Bishop looks to be in no need of caffeine after his first taste of the S1000XR. 'What a bike,' he gasps. 'I think I may need to sell my R1300GS and get one of these instead.' Blimey. I think we've had quite different starts to our day.

Sublime to the ridiculous

The stark difference between the two bikes is evident from the first press of their starters. Where the Honda respectfully rumbles into life, the BMW shatters the silence with a fast-paced, feral, impatient howl through its Akrapovic. This, I suspect, is the S1000XR's idea of a warning call.

We've seen superbike engines slotted into versatile machines before, from R1s in Fazers, to Fireblades in CBFs, to GSX-Rs in GSX-Ss. But few, if any, have retained so much sharp-edged sports character. Alright, in pure technical terms this isn't quite a full-fat S1000RR lump – there's no ShiftCam variable valve system, and peak power has been trimmed from over 200bhp to 'just' 168bhp. But the S1000XR feels focused, like it means business.

After the Honda's plush perch, the BMW's seat seems thin, tall and firm. Brakes bite with intensity and immediacy. Even letting out the clutch lever commands attention – partly because the Honda doesn't have one, but mostly because the BMW's tall first gear and light-feeling flywheel mean it's actually quite easy to stall.

Picking up Shropshire B-roads we pass through Knockin (complete with perfectly named 'The Knockin Shop'), slip seamlessly over the border, and pick up signs for beautiful Bala. Each mile is prettier than the last, hedgerow-lined countryside expanding out into wide-open views of mist-topped hills, brief dives through tree-lined tunnels, before eventually, the rest of the world falls away completely. It's just two bikes, one road, romping along rolling, rugged, middle-of-nowhere splendour.

The S1000XR relishes this empty space. It feels like releasing a tiger from a zoo cage. Above 7000rpm the inline four really comes alive – not in a peaky, powerbandy sense; it's just part of the motor's sporty DNA. Peak torque is uncovered way up at 9250rpm (higher than the Honda even revs), meaning every extra rpm brings the motor closer towards its happy place, simultaneously becoming stronger as it travels faster.

Once you get the S1000XR shifting, the rest of the bike loves it, too. Swapping from 'Road' to 'Dynamic' mode takes one push of one button and makes a noticeable difference. The engine feels more crisp. The semi-active suspension firms up, making it tight and taut without being harsh. The two-way quickshifter is a joy too, slicing through gears far more smoothly than any of BMW's boxer-engined bikes, and feeling barely any slower or slicker than Honda's DCT set-up.

As we drop into Bala after a fantastic, brain-clearing yomp, the price to be paid for the XR's firepower is evident. The BMW is down to its final few litres of fuel, with a message on the TFT instructing me to fill up immediately. Despite having almost exactly the same-sized tank, the NT hasn't even started to sweat. At the pumps, the BMW costs 20 per cent more to fill up, despite covering the same distance as the Honda at (roughly) the same speeds. Yeouch.

The humble hustler

In the morning we head out through the Tryweryn Valley. It's a beautiful ride, the quiet A-road snaking slowly around the shore of a huge reservoir, while distant peaks nuzzle gently up through a thin layer of low cloud. Sadly,

Listen carefully and you can hear Y Ddraig Goch roaring in the mountains. Or is it the BMW?

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No numb bum. But no Sport mode and that road means this is XR territory

it's also the spot where the village of Capel Celyn once stood, before it was intentionally flooded in the 1960s to create said reservoir.

Back on the NT1100, it's safe to say the Honda doesn't have much of a concealed dark side. The pace naturally picks up as we slip onto the majestic B4391, which twists and turns spectacularly out through blonde-tufted wilderness, crossing stone bridges and cattle grids along the way. It's easily the best riding we've come across so far, and the NT1100 proves pretty up for the challenge, steering steadily but confidently on its excellent Metzeler Roadtec 01 tyres.

The Honda sits you lower than the BMW, which exaggerates the perception that it's a long bike – although on paper the NT's wheelbase is actually shorter than the XR's. You can sense that the Honda's carrying more weight (a measured 264kg fuelled up versus the XR's 237kg) while the slightly jiggly suspension movement makes it clear this isn't a bike that wants to be chucked about too aggressively.

Ah – I've left it in 'Tour' mode, whereas this kind of riding surely demands a gnarlier 'Sport' setting. Only there isn't one. Still, I'm sure I can firm up the NT's fancy new semi-active suspension at the push of a button, to try to bring it closer to the BMW's sublime roadholding and precision. Nope again: I can't change the Honda's damping on the move; and it's already in the hardest setting anyway.

Still, even if it doesn't match the BMW's high-speed control and composure, the semi-active system is still pretty capable. Lewis is impressed, reckoning it gives a substantial handling improvement over the previous NT1100. 'It feels a lot tighter,' he declares. 'It's more composed, more balanced. The old bike didn't feel as stable, and it seemed like the front wanted to run wide. This semi-active suspension has transformed the handling.'

What you get for your cash

	Honda NT1100 DCT £14,099	**BMW S1000XR TE £21,770**
• Cornering ABS and traction control	Yes	Yes
• Gearbox	Dual Clutch Transmission	Two-way quickshifter
• Centrestand	Yes	Yes
• Heated grips	Yes	Yes
• Keyless ignition	No	Yes
• Panniers	Yes	No
• Cruise control	Yes	Yes
• Semi-active suspension	Yes	Yes
• Rear preload adjustment	Electronic, four settings	Automatic self-levelling
• Tyre pressure monitors	No	Yes
• Lithium battery	Yes	Yes

Skips through tangled bits with unexpected ease

Chalk and cheese in every way except for both being superb sports tourers

The NT's motor hasn't experienced a similar a transformation, however. For 2025 it gets larger airbox intakes, longer trumpets, plus a new crank, con rods and pistons, all of which Honda say adds a hefty seven per cent midrange boost. From onboard, it still feels like the same Africa Twin motor to me. I find the faux-V-twin firing intervals quite charming though, and the low-revving character means all the performance is served up generously and easily. It's not like the power's all tucked away on a high shelf; it's there, right in front of you, staring you in the face.

There's plenty of it to charge along at a fair old lick, too. On paper the NT makes a shade over 100bhp, which likely means more than 90bhp at the rear tyre. Switching DCT to manual mode improves the sense of connection. Changing gears with finger triggers isn't any less 'involving' than knocking a two-way quickshifter lever up and down with your toes. But it's fair to say the NT's delivery is all very measured, very considered. It hustles with humility, rather than leaping about luridly.

Naked aggression

We carry on north up through beautiful Betws-y-Coed, then out west again to begin climbing along the incredible Llanberis Pass, a tight and twisty tourist hotspot slicing sweetly between the Glyder mountain range and Snowdon itself – today looking suitably resplendent with its snow-capped peak. The area's popular with walkers and rock climbers, but it's hard to imagine anyone round here getting more of a rush today than from riding an S1000XR.

It's not the XR's outright power or speed that delivers such a thrilling ride – self-preservation and common decency cuts in long before you even approach the foothills of trying to go properly tonto. Instead, the BMW feels so lively thanks to its delivery. It's snappy and zappy, an engine that picks up and gathers speed with a rabid appetite. Open the throttle with intent and the XR gives you a glimpse of the implausible potency it's packing. You roll off the throttle feeling in awe of it all.

The other side is the S1000XR's supremely composed chassis. After a few hours of chucking the Honda around, I climb back on the BMW and let muscle memory push the handlebars. At the first bend, the XR snaps onto its side so hard and fast I have to pick it back up to avoid running into the inside verge. It feels like I'm aboard a four-cylinder supermoto. Note to self: less effort needed. And there's no apparent trade-off in stability – the XR's not just more animated and accurate, it's solid at speed, too.

'The S1000XR feels so light and so agile,' enthuses Lewis. 'I love the way it steers so effortlessly and drops into corners with such composure and incredible ease. Its sporty side totally outshines the Honda.'

For sure. But I wouldn't say the same for its touring side. With the sun starting to sink and the temperature dropping starkly, I'm reminded how the XR's wind protection is less generous than expected. With slim bodywork and a short screen to tuck in behind, it feels noticeably colder from onboard than the wide, well-shielded NT.

The BMW feels tingly too, especially when you're holding it at a steady speed, where it revs far higher than the Honda. On the steady ride back to the hotel my fingers notice high-frequency vibrations through the 'bars, while the small mirrors quite often get blurry. I'm definitely fidgeting around in the BMW's skinny seat more, too. Thinking ahead to the 200-mile ride home tomorrow, and with temperatures forecast to be a tad nippy in the morning, I surprise myself by quietly longing for the easy life offered by the Honda.

Approaching the finish

After brushing a bit of frost off the bikes in the morning, we wave a fond farewell to Wales and reluctantly retrace our way home. Lewis remains besotted by the BMW. 'I much prefer the XR,' he grins, as if it needed to be said out loud. 'And not just because of its fiery engine. I think it's more rounded, too. It can do miles in reasonable comfort and still give massive thrills. The Honda makes a great tourer, and it's one of the comfiest bikes I've ever ridden, but that's all it does. It feels a bit soul-less.'

He has a point. We already knew the BMW is more 'sports' and the Honda more 'tourer' – that's obvious. What we wanted to answer is which bike is better at bringing the two worlds together. And it's a fair conclusion to say the BMW is better at being a tourer than the Honda is at feeling sporty. So S1000XR wins, right?

Not yet: there's still the slightly vulgar topic of money. The NT, in this flagship spec with electronic suspension and DCT, is £14,099. That's for everything you see here: panniers, heated grips, centrestand, the lot. That's less than the S1000XR, which starts at £16,790 in bare-bones spec. Step up to the TE with most of the goodies and you're at £18,340. Add the M Package and the other extras on our test bike and the bill hits a towering £21,770, or well over 50 per cent more than the NT. 'Even with the huge price difference, I'd still choose the XR,' says Lewis, confidently.

Well, I wouldn't. It might be the 20-year age difference between us, but I'm not sure I could bring myself to stump up that much cash for faster steering, a noisier exhaust and a glut of horsepower I'd rarely use. The NT isn't perfect – it is a bit lacking aesthetically and dynamically next to the action-packed XR, and some aspects of the Honda's controls and interface are frustrating, sure. But it feels a lot more grounded in reality, it's much easier-going than the ever-frenetic XR, and it's so much cheaper both to buy and to run. It's the bike I'd rather take sports touring.
Final score: Hare 1 – 1 Tortoise. *Bike*

SPECIFICATIONS	HONDA NT1100 DCT ES	BMW S1000XR TE
Contact	www.honda.co.uk	www.bmw-motorrad.co.uk
Price (on the road)	£14,099	from £18,340 (£21,770 as tested)
Capacity	1084cc	999cc
Engine	8v SOHC parallel twin	16v DOHC inline four
Bore x stroke	92mm x 81.5mm	80mm x 49.7mm
Transmission	6-speed, chain	6-speed, chain
Power (claimed)	101bhp @ 7500rpm	168bhp @ 11,000rpm
Torque (claimed)	83 lb.ft @ 5500rpm	84 lb.ft @ 9250rpm
Top speed	130mph (est)	160mph (est)
Frame	steel semi-double cradle	aluminium twin-spar
Front suspension	43mm usd telescopic forks, semi-active damping	45mm usd telescopic forks, semi-active damping
Rear suspension	monoshock, adjustable preload and semi-active damping	monoshock, adjustable preload and semi-active damping
Brakes (f/r)	2 x 310mm discs, four-piston calipers / 256mm disc, single-piston caliper	2 x 320mm discs, four-piston calipers / 265mm disc, two-piston caliper
Tyres (f/r)	120/70 ZR17 / 180/55 ZR17	120/70 ZR17 / 190/55 ZR17
Rake / trail	26.5° / 108mm	25.2° / 118mm
Wheelbase	1535mm	1541mm
Weight	264kg (measured, inc panniers)	237kg (measured, as tested)
Seat height	820mm	850mm
Tank size	20.4 litres	20 litres
Economy	51.7mpg, 232-mile range	43.6mpg, 192-mile range
Electronics	cornering ABS and traction control, cruise control, riding modes, DCT gearbox	cornering ABS and traction control, cruise control, riding modes, two-way quickshifter
Colours	black, blue, warm ash	black, blue (Sport pack), white (M package)
Availability	now	also now

***Bike* verdict** Two very different ways of covering miles in high-speed comfort. If it's all about excitement, the BMW self selects – but the Honda is the choice for ride comfort, breezy progress and proper miles.

***Bike* rating**	9/10	9/10

'If it's about excitement, the BMW self-selects – but the Honda is the choice for comfort and breezy miles'

Baby Shark is now all grown up and ready to ambush Ducati dominance

The Oxley interview

Mat is a TT winner, endurance racer, author and MotoGP paddock insider

'I just like to get on the bike and go flat out – and that's it!'

Pedro 'The Shark' Acosta is MotoGP's most exciting young talent. The new factory rider at troubled KTM talks fighting Ducati hordes, trying to use his brain, and getting bored of speaking to journalists

By **Mat Oxley** Photography **KTM, Red Bull**

It's the oldest trick in the MotoGP journalist's book. Whenever you sit down to interview a rider you start with the easy questions: flatter his ego, or, in pit-lane speak, 'tickle his balls'. Only later do you hit him with the hard questions, so if he decides he's had enough of you and storms out, you've already got enough to write the story.

That's how I start this interview with MotoGP's latest sensation, Pedro 'The Shark' Acosta. We're talking in KTM's paddock office, and I've scribbled some numbers in my notebook, which lies on the table between us.

Everyone knows that last year's MotoGP championship was a Ducati walkover. The Bologna brand won 19 of the 20 Grands Prix and filled 53 of 60 podium places. Who filled the other seven podium places? One went to long-time KTM rider Brad Binder, one to Maverick Vinales and the other five to rookie Acosta, who was still a teenager at the start of his premier-class apprenticeship.

So, I start off by asking the former Moto2 and Moto3 world champion what he thinks about being MotoGP's lone force fighting the Ducati hordes, half-expecting him to stretch back in his chair, looking pleased with himself, because many riders would do exactly that.

But he doesn't. Instead, his right index finger stabs at the podium numbers written in my notebook.

'Okay, it's true that I was the KTM guy with more podiums,' he says. 'But we are not looking for this [he points at his podium total], we are looking for this [he points at Ducati's total]. There is still a way to go…'

In other words, Acosta hasn't let his ego get the better of him and

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Practising Ted Rogers hand moves in Indonesia, 2024

Gentle first trundle on the factory KTM, Barcelona test

knows he is still climbing the mountain, so he's not interested in looking back and enjoying the view. He will save that for when he reaches the top.

And you won't find anyone in the MotoGP pit lane who doesn't think Acosta will make it all the way to the top, because he has a remarkable talent to ride a motorcycle, more so than any MotoGP newcomer since Marc Marquez. The 20-year-old is also super-sharp and has a great attitude, with that certain swagger that identifies the sport's true gunslingers. So, what does he think is his greatest strength?

When I asked him this question in 2023, shortly before he wrapped up that year's Moto2 championship, he replied: 'Big balls. Big balls! From the moment I arrived here I tried to show people that I'm not afraid of anyone. So, big balls, why not?'

This time he gives a different answer, because MotoGP is a very different game: 300bhp, 225mph and NASA-like electronics. There is a lot going on.

'In MotoGP you need more brain, that's clear,' he says. 'But it's not about brain, it's not about talent, it's not about balls – it's a combination of many things.'

So, what's the most important among those many things?

'Keep calm,' Acosta states. 'But this isn't something I learned last season – it's something I learned from a young age, but I forgot along the way.

'I've been talking a lot with Aki [Ajo, Red Bull KTM's new team manager, who was also Acosta's boss in his Moto2 and Moto3 days) and this is exactly what I was missing sometimes last season – keep calm. Keep calm, man! I mean, racing is simple if we keep it simple.

'Maybe there will arrive one moment when it will get so difficult for my mind, but now I take it easy: having fun and enjoying riding. We need to keep it calm.

'During the winter I was focused on some specific things to become more competitive in races: try to use the head a bit more because last year I sometimes put the whole weekend in the bin just because I made a bad qualifying, or lost a big amount of points just for stupid crashes. So… try to be a bit more calm, try to use the brain.'

MotoGP riders may pump themselves up like cage fighters before a race – because they are basically going into war – but they also need a super-chilled inner serenity, otherwise the pressure will burn their brains.

Modern MotoGP is a high-pressure cooker – from the racetrack to the garage and from journalist debriefs to sponsor meet-and-greets. Everyone wants a piece of you, especially in the garage, where you're surrounded by data analysts, tyre analysts, electronics strategists and aerodynamicists who have you spending hours each day gazing at squiggly lines on computer monitors, trying to divine another hundredth of a second from yourself and your motorcycle.

Then you're out there in qualifying – the riskiest moment of a MotoGP weekend – laying your life on the line in pursuit of a hundredth of a second at every corner, because one tenth can make the difference between the second row of the grid and the fourth row, which can make the difference between glory and despair on Sunday afternoon.

Acosta knows all this, but his hugely experienced crew chief Paul Trevathan knows it even better.

'Qualifying is basically about going over the limit,' says Trevathan. 'Many riders tell me that a qualifying lap is like losing one of their lives. It's a little bit, you know…'

Acosta and Trevathan have built a strong bond since they started working together at the end of 2023. Their relationship is reminiscent of Valentino Rossi and Jeremy Burgess, a partnership that won seven MotoGP crowns.

'Paul isn't just an engineer with a computer,' Acosta explains. 'I really love how he manages all the crew, how he manages my head, how he manages everything around me and how we have made our group super-close, so it's not possible to put shit between us. It's super-nice.'

Acosta may have moved from the independent Tech3 squad to KTM's factory team this year, but he gelled so well with his 2024 crew that he's kept the same key players by his side.

‘Keep calm. Keep calm, man! I mean, racing is simple if we keep it simple… having fun and enjoying riding’

Make way, rookie coming through: Acosta in fourth at Mugello last year (leader out of shot)

‘I’ve kept Paul, my data guy, my electronics strategist and my tyre guy, who was my Moto2 mechanic and is now one of my MotoGP mechanics. Keeping the same people around you is super-important. Paul and my whole team is my bubble – even when we’re not at races we spend time together.’

Trevathan’s job is to suck up the pressure around Acosta and let him do his thing, which is unleashing his natural talent. ‘I’m not really a technical rider,’ says Acosta. ‘I just like to get on the bike and go flat out – and that’s it!’

This year the youngster needs to ensure he doesn’t repeat the mistakes he made last year, when he scored two podiums at the first three GPs, then fell into a hole, crashing too much and going almost half the season before he came good again, scoring three more podiums.

‘We were struggling,’ he recalls. ‘I was pushing more and I was struggling more, like a snowball effect. Sometimes it’s better to stop, breathe and start again. Crashing is part of the process but it’s also true that maybe if I’d had less crashes I’d have had more confidence. I needed to be calm and understand that maybe if I went slower we would get further; like the story of the tortoise and the rabbit.’

To be fair, Acosta’s slump wasn’t his fault alone. ‘We always keep trying to improve the bike,’ says Trevathan. ‘We were trying to understand that maybe something we were doing wasn’t good enough, so we tried a

Pedro Acosta CV

Born: 25 May 2004
Lives: Puerto de Mazarrón, Spain
» **2017** Spanish PreMoto3 champion
» **2018** 34th Moto3 junior world championship
» **2019** 2nd Red Bull MotoGP Rookies Cup
» **2020** Red Bull MotoGP Rookies Cup champion
» **2021** Moto3 world champion
» **2022** 5th Moto2 world championship
» **2023** Moto2 world champion
» **2024** 6th MotoGP world championship

different direction with geometry and electronics. We got some good results and we thought, this is good, let's continue down this path.

'But after a while we hit rock bottom. Pedro was like "fuck, I can't ride the bike!" and we could see that. So, we reverted to the old set-up and all of a sudden we realised "shit it wasn't just him, it was us!". I'm really proud of how he dealt with that, looking at everything together.

'MotoGP is a bloody complicated thing – to understand each part of the bike and what he needs to go faster. He learned so much from that moment.

'In MotoGP's new format [sprint races on Saturday, which means pre-qualifying on Friday afternoon] you have no time. You do a few runs on Friday and you're straight into time attacks. I'm super-proud of Pedro for what he achieved last year. He learned so much while under constant stress.'

This year's KTM RC16 doesn't look very different to last year's, which won't surprise anyone who's been keeping an eye on the company's financial misfortunes: £1.9 billion in debts, insolvency proceedings and hopes of a huge cash injection by Indian brand Bajaj and/or Chinese brand CFMoto.

In fact, KTM has made some key upgrades to the RC16, most notably a tuned mass damper in the seat hump designed to damp out tyre chatter and vibration – that age-old enemy of fast lap times.

'We are trying to make the bike calmer,' Acosta explains. 'Last year the bike was often shaking [vibrating], so we were losing speed, so fixing this is our number-one priority.'

If the mass damper does its job, the RC16 may finally make the most of Michelin's super-grippy, super-tricky rear slick, because right now Ducati are the only factory that can fully exploit the tyre – a major factor behind the Bologna brand's dominance.

'We are trying with the setting, the balance and everything to help the tyre,' Acosta adds. 'The bike is working a bit better now but there's still a way to go.'

Understanding racing technologies and riding techniques are a MotoGP rider's biggest jobs, but last year Acosta had to learn about

On the brakes at Sachsenring, about to execute a trademark tight entry

‘Pedro learned so much last year while under constant stress – I’m super-proud of him’

Above: with crew chief Paul Trevathan. Fewer giggles now he’s a factory boy...

Right: Acosta leading the Rookies charge, 2020 Austrian GP

Left: practice start at the recent Sepang pre-season test. Ace pipes

something else – dealing with media pressure. Of course, he was already making headlines in Moto2 and Moto3, but riders only feel the full force of the media spotlight once they’re in the premier class.

The first few times I interviewed Acosta he was full of jokes, like in Qatar last year after his first sprint race, during which he smoked his RC16’s rear slick and stunned his elders with some daring overtakes.

‘The sprint is a completely different mentality,’ he grinned at the time. ‘You just put your balls on and go!’

He was always full of quips and jokes, making journalists laugh and gifting us fan-pleasing headlines. Now, not so much.

‘Many times, journalists ask the same questions! In the end everything has a limit, so I ran out of jokes. I have to say the media is never fun. It isn’t easy to say the correct things, to not make a mess and to be politically correct. So, it’s never easy, because we need to not lose our natural character but also not to make a mess.’

This year Acosta may once again be the only rider who can take it to Ducati, but perhaps his real focus has to be on the longer term – especially if KTM doesn’t have the budget to battle Ducati and everyone else. His KTM deal runs to the end of 2027, but perhaps his management saw into a crystal ball when they negotiated the contract last summer – before the company’s money woes became public knowledge – because they included clauses that will allow him to quit KTM if certain conditions aren’t met.

There’s no doubt about it: MotoGP 100 per cent needs Acosta on a 100 per cent competitive motorcycle. Bike

NEXT ISSUE Helmet designer **Aldo Drudi** puts down his paintbrush and invites Mat for a natter

History in the making

Triumph's new **Speed Twin 1200** is their latest mix of heritage and modernity. We pitch it against the 274-year-old B6318 – the longest B-road in the UK

By **Chris Cope** Photography **Andy McCandlish**

The days are getting longer. You can actually feel it now. The Long Dark is loosening its grip; the good has begun to outweigh the bad. In springtime, there is an almost insatiable need to ride – to make up for time lost to the gloom. Any excuse to be on a bike is a good excuse, but the B6318 is a particularly good one.

Not too long ago (Dec 2024 issue), Simon Hargreaves explored the UK's longest road – the A1. By definition, it's also the UK's longest A road, which got me thinking: what about the longest B-road? Turns out this is a 61.4-mile stretch that cuts across northern England and veers into Scotland. The perfect distance for a *carpe diem* sunny-day ride. Whereas the A1 is an exercise in suffering, the B6318 is a scenic tour through British history.

Stone me: some of Hadrian's rubble went under the B6318

PICS: ANDY MCCANDLISH

That spring is here is glorious, but this time of year still requires you to be tactical: riding gear by the door, bike prepped for use at a moment's notice. And so, when Capitano Armitage sends an email – 'Look at the bloomin' weather!' – I'm already out the door and heading north on the new Triumph Speed Twin 1200 before it hits my inbox.

Triumph have lightly updated the Speed Twin 1200 for 2025. Very lightly. The main differences are a boost in peak power (now 104bhp, against the previous generation's 96bhp), a less sticky-outy headlight, and tank graphics of which this correspondent is not a fan. It looks like something that would come from a less-well-known manufacturer. Which is to say, it feels derivative – styling comprised of other people's ideas. It's as if someone has fed images of previous generations of Speed Twin into AI and entered the prompt: 'Make this bike appeal to a slightly younger audience.'

It's only opinion. Yours may differ. And I'll concede that the 1200 is far from ugly. Additionally, the top-notch attention to detail and dedication to quality that we expect from Triumph are to be found here. Well, mostly. What's your opinion of plastic mudguards on a £12,495 modern classic? But, as the old saying goes: the best bike for you is the bike that you are riding. And when you are riding the engaging Speed Twin 1200 its visual foibles are invisible and irrelevant.

Getting to the start of the B6318 means having to retrace a few hundred miles of Hargreaves' A1 adventure, but the next morning I am in Heddon-on-the-Wall, where the road begins. Or ends, depending on your perspective. American journalist Peter Egan once wrote that no motorcyclist should feel obligated to ride when the temperature is below their age in Fahrenheit. This is a morning for younger men. But the sun is out, and the forecast promises age-appropriate temps by lunchtime.

The story of the B6318 starts some 1900 years ago, with the construction of Hadrian's Wall. For its first 30 or so miles, the road runs parallel to the iconic Roman fortification. And in the 1750s, when this section was built, big chunks of the wall were reportedly used in its construction. Equally, both the wall and the road had a similar intended purpose of helping authorities deal with those pesky Scottish. It's a strange sign of respect when someone builds a road to facilitate their coming to kill you. Scotland is marked with many displays of English respect. North of Glasgow, pretty much every major route was originally a military road constructed with the aim of helping to quell rebellions. The man behind many of those roads – and this one – was Field Marshal George Wade.

In November 1745, a load of Scottish Jacobites took over Carlisle. Wade was stationed in Newcastle at the time and unable to reach them because of bad weather, so plans for a road connecting the two cities were drawn up. However, construction would not begin until 1751 – a number of years after both Wade and the Jacobite rising had died.

I've ridden this section of what became the B6318 a few times before. It is one of my favourites in Britain, but for a slightly odd reason. I'm from the US. Specifically, I'm from Texas and was partially raised in Minnesota. Those are landscapes where no one ever notices the limited cornering capability of a cruiser. Sometimes I miss that sort of thing. If I squint, the rolling hills, agricultural

Thankfully a wall not constructed by Mr Hadrian

PENTON 8
KERSHOPEFOOT 8½
CANONBIE 11
B 6318
KIRKCAMBECK 4¼
BRAMPTON 10½
GILSLAND 12
B 6318

landscape, limited traffic, and mostly straight course of this first part of the B6318 triggers emotional memories of roads I meandered in my teenage years.

It's fair to say the Speed Twin's abilities are underutilised here. The rumble of its 270°-crank parallel twin is delightful – seriously, this bike sounds *good* – but in this setting you'd prefer to have the same engine in a different set-up: that of a Bonneville T120, for example. Or Bobber, or Speedmaster. Maybe even a Scrambler 1200. Because, although the Speed Twin 1200 is comfortable enough for all-day rides, it is markedly less so than those others.

But, you know: enjoy the moment, man. The scenery here is incredible. This is a road for meditation. It rises and dips, and on every crest there is another postcard view. The heart flutters and somewhere in the back of the mind one can hear Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*. And here the Triumph deserves a nod of appreciation, because it's willing to let me be in this moment. Ostensibly, it is a supernaked (really) and other bikes of this class would be fighting my untroubled pace. The Triumph settles into it without criticism or complaint.

To the left and right Roman sites spark the imagination. But then, there's an absence that brings confused sadness. For 150 years, an iconic feature of this landscape had been Sycamore Gap – a large, solitary tree growing within a cartoonish dip in the hillside. In September 2023, it was cut down in the dead of night. No one knows why (the men accused of destroying the landmark are set to stand trial in late April). A few hundred metres further on, the Twice Brewed Inn provides one of the few places to stop along the B6318. It's been around since at least the time of

Big miles on a Speed Twin 1200

The Triumph is not intended as a touring motorcycle. But the B6318 is quite a way from the *Bike* bunker and I clocked up 445 miles travelling there and back, mostly on motorway and dual carriageway. Here are some things I observed:

» There are no bungee points (boo), but you can secure a Kriega bag by looping straps on the rear subframe.

» Sharing the surfboard-style seat with luggage leaves little room to move around, especially if you are 6ft 1in tall.

» The riding position is comfortable enough for hour-long stretches. But after that, you need to get off and walk around.

» At steady motorway speed, the 14.5-litre tank gives 160 miles before a 'low fuel' warning flashes on the screen. Annoyingly, this warning comes when there are still two bars showing on the fuel gauge.

» Above 75mph, the bike delivers noise before it delivers power. It's like a teenager when you ask them to do stuff: 'Okay, I'm doing it!'

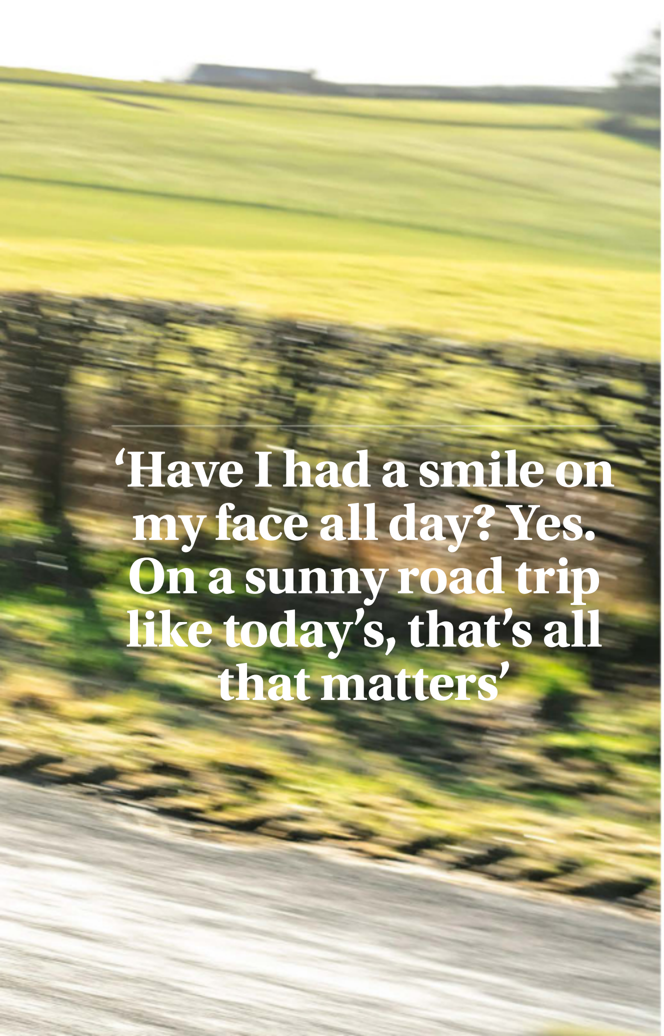
» The heated grips are excellent.

» The headlight throws a surprisingly good amount of light.

» The switchgear is nigh impossible to use in the dark. My cousin can solve a Rubik's cube blindfolded, so he'd be okay; but it's a pain for the rest of us.

» The peg for the sidestand is hidden beneath the shifter, so effectively invisible to both eye and boot when seated. Parking requires I first step off the bike, hold it upright, then kick-feel for the stand with my toe until I luck into success.

Heated grips brilliant; unlit switches less so



'Have I had a smile on my face all day? Yes. On a sunny road trip like today's, that's all that matters' the road's construction, and no one can agree on how it got its name. This is how history works, I suppose. We try to create connections and narratives, but really, the past is just stuff that happened. If I were staying at the inn, I'd be keen to get philosophical on this over a few pints. But motorcycling is about staying focused on the present. And right now, the sun is shining, the roads are dry, and there are twisty bits to the east.

At Greenhead, Wade's military road becomes the A69 and continues its march to Carlisle. The B6318 becomes a bit like history: incongruous. The road is not so much a through line but a collection of points. It narrows – often lacking lane markings – and twists through hedgerows and forest; it cuts past farms and villages that have more letters in their names than residents; it rises and falls. Here, at last, the new Speed Twin is able to show off. The suspension is supple enough to handle a road beaten by northern winters. It's responsive enough to dodge piles of manure. Braking lacks subtlety for my tastes but you adapt to it quickly. The transmission is buttery smooth. The higher-spec (and higher priced) Speed Twin 1200 RS has a quickshifter, but I'd find it difficult to validate such expenditure when the base model's gearbox is so friendly. Fuelling, too, is perfect. Everything is just so… Triumph.

And, yet, as someone who has owned a number of Triumphs, I'm finding this one hard to really connect with. *Bike*'s one-sentence assessment of the previous-generation Speed Twin 1200 (2019-2024) was: 'Great, but a bit… lost.' And I feel that still holds true. It's a great bike, certainly. Yet it's a little too heavy to be a B-road bomber, a little too sharp to be a B-road bimbler. It's not superior to any other Triumph. Name something you want the Speed Twin 1200 to do, and Triumph already have at least one other model that does that thing better.

Get headless or enjoy a pootle? There's only one winner...

> 'This is a road for meditation – it rises and dips, and on every crest there is another postcard view'

Other long places to ride a motorcycle

Longest motorway:
M6 (231 miles)
Longest straight road:
18-mile section of A15
Longest tunnel:
Queensway Tunnel (2.13 miles)
Longest bridge:
Bromford Viaduct
(3.5 miles)

Tank stripe not for everyone but you can't see it when you're riding it

SCOTLAND
welcomes you

Thank you. It's nice to be here

Superb historic landscape made all the better by two cylinders rumbling away

I've lived here long enough to feel a sense of homeyness towards the Triumph brand, and so wanting to give it the benefit of the doubt, I consider whether my issues are actually just winter mental rust. After all, spring has only just arrived. I've spent the past several months tiptoeing around corners and imagining ice in every wet patch. Maybe the problem is not the bike but the rider. Maybe I'm not giving it enough of a chance to impress me. This bit of the B6318 provides plenty of opportunity to work out that mental rust. It is so quiet here that I can stop just about anywhere, wheel around, and gun through corners over and over. I turn this into a little clinic for myself – working on line, body position, throttle, and more. The bike is great… and yet I never properly gel. I never find that magic point where the Triumph gives me the confidence to let it do all the things that I'm pretty sure it can.

When the road crosses into Scotland the little Speed Twin 1200 becomes totally the wrong bike for the job. That is not Triumph's fault. No one appears to have told Dumfries and Galloway Council that it is responsible for the maintenance of this particular stretch of road. It is so muddy and riddled with potholes in sections that I find myself wondering if, in fact, there is any road here at all. I'm up on the 'pegs and doing all my things-I-learned-in-off-road-riding-courses techniques, but the bike's tyres and suspension are no match for the conditions. It's sliding all over the place. I rarely get out of second gear. At one point, I hit a rut that jars the bike so badly that it simply shuts itself off. When I start it back up, the whole system has reset and the TFT display is telling me it's 1 January 2000. Happy new millennium…

In its final miles, the road smooths and runs alongside the River Esk. It is beautiful here, the air fresh and clean. I slow to a crawl, open my visor, and take in deep breaths. I can hear the rush of the river over the rich burble of the engine. It is bliss. Then, too suddenly, I'm at Skippers Bridge. The end of the road. Here, the B6318 junctions with the A7. Turn left to go to Carlisle; turn right to go to Edinburgh. Begrudgingly, I turn left for the journey home. I'll be back someday, but on a different motorcycle. I really like this Triumph, but that's only because it reminds me of other Triumphs.

As with aesthetics, your opinion may differ. In fact, I'm certain that for many I am talking nonsense. When this model was launched in 2019, it scored an effusive 9/10 from John Westlake (April 2019) and picked up Bike of the Year a few months later (Oct 2019). Hugo Wilson described it as 'a joyous feel-good entertainer' and Señor Armitage declared it was 'summertime bend-swinging perfection'. That's three against one. Probably more than that. After all, Triumph wouldn't keep a model in its line-up for six years if it didn't tick enough boxes to open wallets. So, maybe it's not the bike. Maybe it's the rider. And maybe I just need to ask the right questions. Does it look good? Apart from the tank, yes. Does it sound good? Hell yes. Does it have lovely cruiser-like grunt and a capable chassis? Yes. Have I had a smile on my face all day? Yes.

Ultimately, on a sunny road trip like today's, that's all that matters. Bike

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20 years at the top

In 2005 Suzuki made a humungous impact with their new GSX-R1000. Two decades later it remains for many the sportsbike high watermark. We celebrate 20 years of the **legendary K5**

By **Mike Armitage**

When I was an impressionable age a mate flogged his Suzuki RGV250 and bought himself an early-1990s GSX-R1100M. Physically imposing and as subtle as Ricky Gervais' stand-up routine, the big Suzuki bludgeoned its way down our favourite local B-roads and terrorised traffic. It even sounded scary: with home-shortened exhaust end cans, the noise was like an attacking squadron of Messerschmitt Bf 109s. You could feel chest hair sprouting just from being in its vicinity.

My first ride on a GSX-R1000 confirmed that large GSX-Rs were monstrous creations. As the eager new boy

Two decades old and still the datum. There aren't many superbikes that can say this...

PICS: SUZUKI, BAUER

on *Performance Bikes* magazine, I'd managed to blag the 2001 K1 model for the weekend and was zooming home feeling smug when it unexpectedly reared up. On a road I'd ridden hundreds of times. I'd never really registered the gentle rise exiting one of the villages – but the K1 saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate its bullish wallop by unexpectedly hoisting a huge wheelie. In third gear. And when Suzuki launched an updated model in 2003 the big GSX-R reputation remained intact – sure, the K3 was a bit lighter, slicker and faster, but remained a bit of a brute. I still got white knuckles and left pinch marks in the seat.

Knowing all this, I headed to Eastern Creek circuit in Australia for the launch of an all-new GSX-R1000 for 2005 wearing extra-stiff underpants and ready to be slapped around the face. But no. Here was a bike with a claimed 176bhp, howling revs and the track-carving geometry of a supersport 600, that was also smaller, tighter and packed fewer kilos. And yet that was also staggeringly polite and accessible.

'This year's GSX-R may be lighter and even more powerful, but it's also amazingly easy to use,' babbled my excited launch report in the April 2005 issue of *Bike*. 'The opposition is formed by some very big hitters, each with its own distinct merits, and the making of the Suzuki could well be the way it blends the good points of each. The comfort and forgiveness of the Honda Fireblade, mixed with the style of the Yamaha R1 and the attitude and speed of the Kawasaki ZX-10R. But the biggest selling point will be the way it's a refinement, rather than a bold leap forward. It's still got the character and elements of the original. It's still a GSX-R.'

A couple of months after the launch, we slung the new K5 into a group test against this big-hitting opposition. It wiped the floor. Never had such a ridiculously powerful device given such control and confidence, or such a corner-hunting chassis been as cheery to swing around on. The GSX-R K5 was breeziest in town, most comfortable on a motorway, as well as giving the biggest thrills on open roads and being (easily) quickest round a race track, whether you were a national-level racer or overly enthusiastic amateur. Yes, it still looked and felt and sounded like a GSX-R – only now with a just-so balance of fury and friendliness. The Suzuki won the test by several elongated country miles.

Later GSX-Rs became weightier and stodgier, losing the fine balance of the K5 and K6 model. Rival manufacturers made long strides forward – the Fireblade bringing plushness, the R1 adding a gargling crossplane soundtrack and the BMW S1000RR starting the electronics revolution. But while they outdid each other on power and speed and widgets, these bikes never captured the equilibrium achieved by the Suzuki.

The K5 blitzed comparison tests. It enthralled and inspired a generation of riders. Ridden by Troy Corser, it won the World Superbike Championship in the year of its launch (both the manufacturers' title and the riders' crown, and the one and only time Suzuki have taken either). And it's openly acknowledged by BMW as the bike they used as the standard-setter for the S1000RR – the bike that has been far and away the UK's best-selling sportsbike in recent years.

Most remarkably, 20 years after its introduction the 2005 GSX-R1000 is still considered the superbike benchmark by those in the know. Engineers, owners and dealers reveal why on the following pages...

SUZUKI
1000
1000

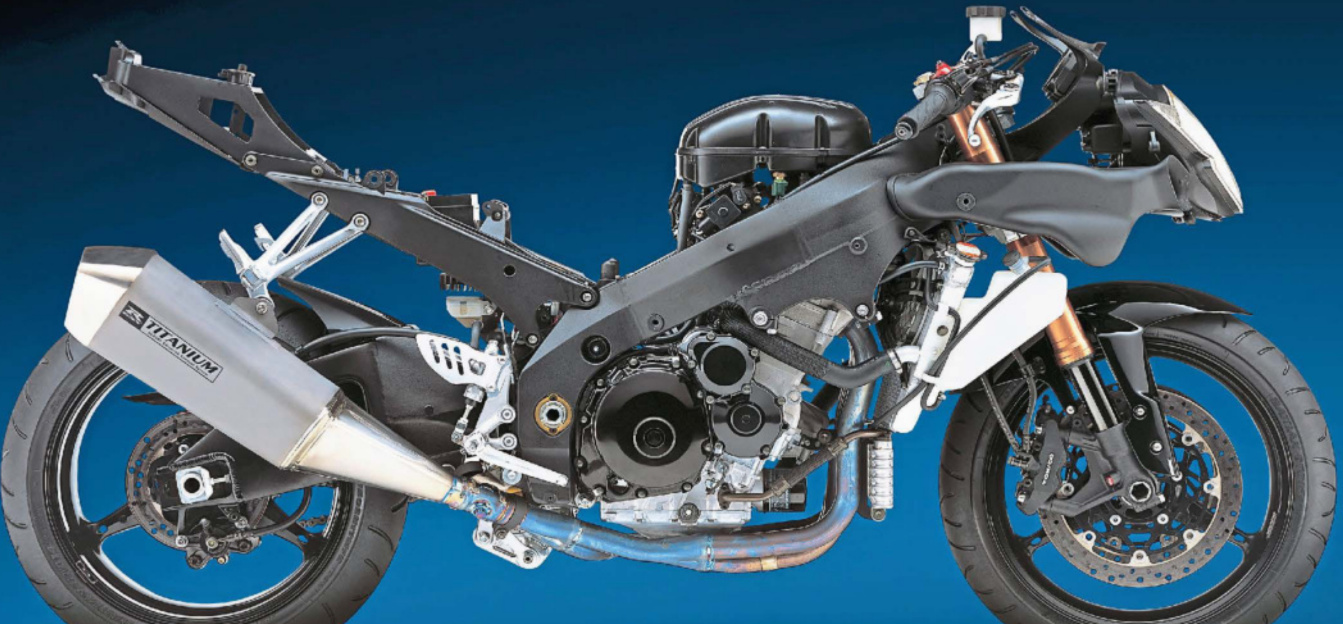
'I headed to the launch wearing extra-stiff underpants and ready to be slapped around'

Left: 1993 world champ spots photographer while following dawdling editor at the K5 launch

Below: same rake, trail and dry weight as a CBR600RR, but with a shorter wheelbase – and 176bhp. Quite a fruity package

FIRST RIDE
GSX-R1000

Smaller frame, thinner tank, with bars and pegs brought closer together. It's narrow. See it head on and you'll wonder where it's all gone



‘It’s all about ba

The 999cc inline-four engine is at the centre of the K5 legend. **Jamie Turner** examines why it was – and still is – an internal combustion marvel

By **Jamie Turner**

It seems quite odd to be writing about an inline four-cylinder engine. Odd because for so long the layout personified the idea of the Universal Japanese Motorcycle and was the go-to layout, yet now everyone seems to favour parallel twins, or V4s, or triples instead. And especially when one of the greatest in collective memory – and the unit still considered a benchmark – is the Suzuki GSX-R1000 K5.

I remember talking to Rupert Paul when he had one after it was launched. He was frothing about it in a very true-bike-enthusiast (and not just bike journalist) sort of way. It seemed an ideal blend of attributes for the (bloomin’ fast) road rider – power and torque were just so. How? The K5 represented both the application of sensible new technology and the ongoing refinement of the I4 concept.

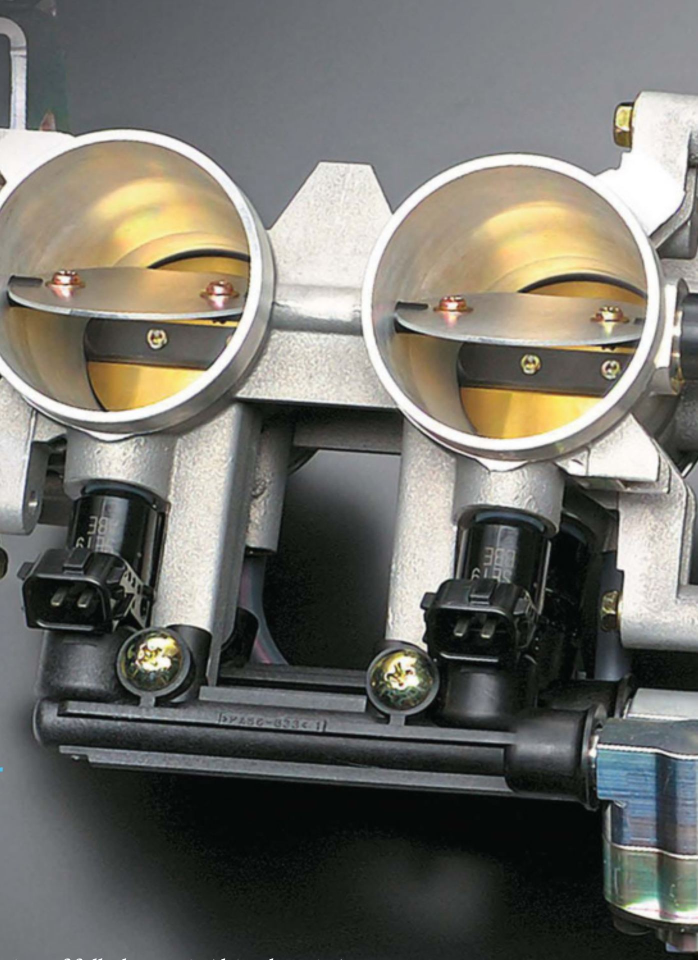
One thing people seem to remember are ‘the holes in the crankcase’. Not the catastrophic ones when an engine puts a leg out of bed, but the holes between the bays to relieve the crankcase pumping set up by the pistons rising and falling 180° out from each other, as is the case with the two pairs of cylinders on either end of a traditional flat-plane crankshaft I4. The faster an engine runs the faster it pushes down on the air (and oil, don’t forget – it’s a maelstrom in there) under the pistons. The air can eventually find its way under the crankshaft and up into the next bay, but it all takes time and the oil adds mass to what has to be moved. As a consequence, work is done and this reduces engine output; it’s especially problematic at high engine speeds.

There are ways round this. Extreme racing engines over-scavenge the crankcase with pumps to reduce the pressure in it to sub-atmospheric and mitigate the problem (at high speeds in a top-line racing engine the work put into the scavenge pumps can be less than the friction removed, so it’s a net win). In a Vee engine the air is pushed from one side to the other by the pistons, although the efficacy of this depends on the phasing. Suzuki did it in the K5 by putting whopping great communication holes between the bays, just under the liners, as high up as they could, to give the shortest path. To be fair, they’d done this on the previous model too – but they enlarged them for the K5 and made a big deal of it. That glorious, light, free-revving K5 feel? That’s due (in part, at least) to the holes.

The new technology was the use of electronically controlled secondary throttles: SDTV, or Suzuki Dual Throttle Valves. I remember thinking at the time that this was quite clever because – working as I was in road car engine development at the time – we were just starting to see the application of full-electronic (drive-by-wire) throttles in production programmes. It all seemed a bit scary then as there was no direct connection between foot and throttle blade. The idea of it on a bike was, well… you get the idea. I hasten to add that this was just the natural mistrust of electronics of a mechanical engineer; it’s as safe as houses now. Anyway, to me the Suzuki approach seemed like an excellent means of putting partial control in the hands of a computer, with the rider still having ultimate control in that he or she could close a throttle if things went haywire. They didn’t of course, because the engine management system suppliers had really done their stuff – a lot of the redundancy stuff came from aviation, where they had had fly-by-wire for a long time. But for this first application it was all very pragmatic.

And once the secondaries were there, Suzuki could use them for clever things. For example, they had secondary injectors that were aimed to impinge on the plate. When a rider opens the throttle in reality – unless the engine is at maximum power – the plate will nearly always be needlessly open. By having a computer limit opening by a map, higher velocities over the secondary blades meant

Jamie Turner has worked for Norton, Lotus Engineering, Cosworth… and owns a nifty GSX-R125



A set of throttle valves for your hammy fists, another for the bike’s computer

PICS: SUZUKI

alance’

‘A first step towards taming big engines with huge power’

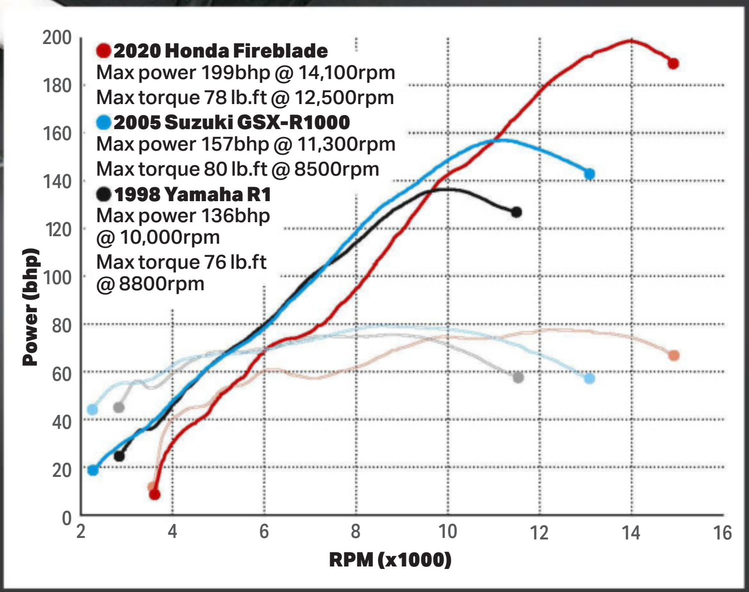
So good back then that Suzuki still use it in their bikes today. What a thing

better atomisation of the fuel from those injectors. Warm-up was probably better too, since the secondary blades could act a bit like a choke (remember those?). But the real gain was that it allowed a first step towards taming big engines with huge power outputs – so that performance could be delivered with a high degree of controllability.

Of course, as soon as full electronic throttles were proven, the twin-throttle concept was binned. But it helped give that brilliant balance of torque and power combined with its civility that the K5 is famed for.

ON THE DYNO

This shows perfectly why the GSX-R1000 K5 feels so glorious. When Yamaha launched the R1 in 1998 its motor had unprecedented grunt – one magazine used the headline ‘savage’ on the front cover, and it felt it. The K5 matches the R1 for wallop all the way to 7000rpm, but with finesse and control thanks to SDTV. And then buggers off in the direction of 160bhp. The Honda’s curves show what racing needs have done to development; yes, the Blade’s power is astounding, but the K5 wastes it all the way to 11,000rpm. At 8000 revs the Suzuki has an extra 25bhp. It’s the perfect mix of old-school clout and revvy big power.



‘It’s almost too good’

Touring, trackdays, all manner of neglect, and **Ben Lindley**’s GSX-R1000 K6 still makes him proud

By **Ben Lindley**

Yes, I am the proud owner of a Suzuki GSX-R1000 K6 (same as the K5 apart from the digit). Yes, I have endured years of being called a Gixer Boy, even though I am technically a man. Yes, I did at one point buy blue and white leathers. And no, I will not reveal exactly where on my body I put the obligatory GSX-R tattoo.

Why put up with this nonsense stereotyping? Because the K6 is a stunningly fast, mechanically superb motorcycle, available as a used purchase for a pleasingly affordable price.

I took this particular K6 for a test ride on an October morning in 2016. I had recently sold a KTM RC8 and was rebounding heavily towards wanting a reliable, stable, powerful superbike with a gearbox that selected neutral without having to switch the engine off first. I’d owned sportsbikes before the RC8 – a 1999 Yamaha R1, 2004 R1, and a 2011 Suzuki GSX-R750 – and decided it was time to benchmark all of these against the most celebrated of litre sportsbikes. Having settled on all of that, the K6 test ride’s only qualifier for success was ‘does it scare me shitless?’. Having answered in the affirmative, it was immediately purchased for £4595.

To this day the K6 is a stupendous machine, capable of shockingly good performance against modern superbikes.

Pretending he knows what he’s doing, tinkering in Rockingham paddock…

K6 should have been excessive on Buttertubs Pass. But it was just glorious

PICS BEN LINDLEY, MIKE ARMITAGE

K5: the owner

Sunny spring camping caper with the *Bike* clan, Tan Hill

One of my favourite ownership memories is from a *Bike* trackday at Rockingham Motor Speedway (may it rest in peace). It was the final session of the day, and only a handful of riders were still out, lapping under the afternoon sun. I'd caught up with two new BMW S1000RRs, and the three of us pinballed between Rockingham's kerbs, chasing each other. The newer bikes were equipped with traction control, lean-angle-sensitive ABS and electronic suspension. Against them, the K6 mustered a slipper clutch. They were quicker on corner exit, but the K6 was just as good under braking and, more importantly, brought just as much joy for its rider. I was chuffed with its performance.

Those perfect racetrack moments haven't happened very often over the past eight years. More usually, the K6 is simply being mistreated. It's been bump-started more times than I'd care to count, squashed into a muddy hedgerow on the Gospel Pass to let an oncoming Land Rover past, laughed at by *Bike* staffers on dirty weekends away, and commuted on through winters full of salted roads.

After all that abuse, I have only two criticisms of any note. First: the finish. It might have an utterly reliable rolling chassis, but the rest needs looking after. Wheel and swingarm paint is nanofilm thin, and fixings get trashed by rain, road grime and the slightest sprinkle of salt. One memorable weekend was spent in our living room with the fairings spread about like clothes at a post-nuptial courting ritual, while I got up in the headers with a toothbrush and a litre of Muc-Off. I must have spent hundreds on replacement bolts from spares warehouse CMSNL. Every delivery of significant value from CMSNL comes with a little keychain mascot – my garage has a whole row dangling by their chains.

Second: being a victim of its own success. The K6 may well be a near-flawless motorcycle to ride in anger. But personally, I think it's almost too good. If I own a monstrous litre superbike that hits 95mph in first gear and shrugs at the concept of ABS or traction control, I want to feel thoroughly blindsided after riding it. Case in point: it has an uncanny ability to keep the front wheel on the ground even at full throttle. If I tattooed myself in order to ride a motorcycle, the least I could ask for is the odd power wheelie past the chippy.

However, these days I appreciate the Suzuki more than ever before. I now seldom see another K5/K6 on the road, no doubt due to a few hundred GSX-Rs leaving circulation each year via the natural process of being unintentionally deposited into ditches. Replacement parts are harder to find, too, and CMSNL's stock of fixings is getting low (I must have bought them all). Yet in this new age of six-axis inertial measurement units and semi-active suspension, it's wild to know that this 20-year-old superbike can still deliver gargantuan thrills, be it road or track. So, yes, I am still the proud owner of a Suzuki GSX-R1000 K6.

Forget that vast TV and Xbox: the living room is obviously for bike cleaning

'It's wild that this 20-year-old superbike can still deliver gargantuan thrills'

K5: the dealer

Who wouldn't want this sight awaiting them?

'I think the K5 is the best bike Suzuki ever made. The K3 and K4 were great, but they were big and felt a generation behind. I had a 954 FireBlade at the time and the K5 was another world – it made my Blade feel 20 years old. It moved the game on.

'As a performance bike, it was the benchmark for years. The K7 was a lot heavier and seemed to be a worse example of a K5. That helped keep K5 prices strong. These days if a K5 or K6 (identical but with new colour schemes) comes into our showroom, they're straight out the door. They command a good premium over a Fireblade or R1 of the same era too – the 04-05 ZX-10Rs have a similar following, but don't fetch the same money.

'Nice low-mileage K5s in blue and white are often advertised at £6000-7000. But even with 35,000 miles they still make £4000 easily. I'm not into bikes as investments – they should be ridden – but a tidy K5 is as strong as it gets on that front.'

James Butler deals with older performance bikes at JB Motorcycles. He knows a thing or four about 'em.

What goes wrong?

'Not much. We look after one that's done 70,000 miles and it's never had a problem. They're typical Suzukis – corrosion is the main issue. There's a big block connector in the main wiring harness down the left side of the fairing by the frame – that corrodes and does funny things to the electrics. The odd cam chain tensioner needs attention but I've never seen one break. Ultimately, they're very solid.

'The brakes were never up to much – they weren't as formidable as the rest of it. R1 radial calipers go on with some spacers, so a lot of the guys racing them fit them, along with a Brembo master cylinder. Then just freshen the suspension and you're away.

'Because of the owners they attracted, K5s probably had harder lives than, say, a Fireblade of the same era. This can cause problems because they are not built like Hondas – the finish certainly isn't as good and the paint comes off the wheels and engine cases.

PICS BAUER, BEN LINDLEY

Why you need a K5 now

James Butler buys, sells and maintains performance bikes from the 1990s and 2000s. Here's why he's smitten with the 2005 GSX-R1000

Words **John Westlake**

> 'We look after one that's done 70,000 miles and never had a problem'

That makes it simple to spot a bike that's been looked after – if it's not tatty, then an owner has been on top of things.'

Who buys them?

'A mixture. There are people going back to older sportsbikes as they're good value – you can do trackdays, go on holidays and ride every day, yet it's not sitting there owing you £20,000. Then you have guys who come in and ask for the fastest thing they can get for £5000.

'Also, a lot of racers are buying them because several clubs are setting up series devoted to older bikes. A couple of friends are racing them in Bemsee's Thunderbike Ultra class [for pre-2007 bikes under 170bhp and over 170kg] and one of them – Jamie Thomas – won it on a K5 he'd raced for four seasons.

'The K5 and K6 are perfect because you don't have to do much to get to that power and weight – Jamie has done very little beyond normal maintenance and it's been completely solid. He loves it. The grid is full of GSX-R1000 K5s and K6s.'

Why are prices so strong?

'When the economic crisis happened in 2008, the exchange rate was in the favour of the Dutch and Belgians and loads of used K5s and K6s went over there. The headlight has quite a flat beam pattern so that was easy to sort, and you could push a button on the dash to change to kilometres. It was their dream bike, and they cleared the UK of a lot. These days, the supply still doesn't match the demand.

'Plus, of course, they're such a brilliant road bike compared to the modern stuff, so demand stays strong. They're 600 size but roomy enough for me at 6ft 3in, and if you're used to riding something like a new Fireblade there's so much grunt. The K5's spread makes a lot of sense for the road: great engine; nice gearbox; easy chassis; not stupidly uncomfortable. Suzuki got the formula right.'

Thank you

James at jbmotorcycles.co.uk always has a stock of '90s bikes and will happily service them, too. Tell him *Bike* sent you.

Pearl of the Danube to the Bay of Kotor

2000km from Budapest to the Adriatic Sea, solving puzzles at checkpoints, watching the clock, riding amazing roads. David Marvier tackles the **Balkan Rally**

Words and photography **David Marvier**

Durmitor National Park, Montenegro: rippled rock, clear tarmac, and an MV

This is Kotor Serpentine Road. It's a suitable name

Getting lost is part of the fun (but is Google cheating?)

Adriatic Sea, Croatia. Brolly is advised

Running over seven days and dissecting breathtaking scenery, the Balkan Rally is an old-school time trial event. Held on public roads, you plot routes and plan how to hit the checkpoints – you ride against the clock, completing various missions and challenges along the way, looking to gain points (and not be penalised). Various awards are handed out, including one for the fastest time. Think *The Cannonball Run*, but with luxury hotels, gala dinners and history-steeped cities rather than Burt Reynolds.

Intended to recapture the magic of traditional rallies, the Balkan is run by an upbeat Hungarian travel agency specialising in 'premium' trips called GoBeyond. The boss is Jano, who is a free-ride skier and a hyperactive type with a permanent smile, and the Rally reflects his personality. It's a challenging journey that features eight stages of about 300km each, crossing vast expanses few travellers can claim to have seen, and encountering everything from pouring rain to scorching sun. And lots of splendid eating.

Entry is open to any bike (or car) at least 30 years old, or that's 'modern heritage' and so has a classic appearance. Retros, then. Those controlling entries will also permit machines with 'unique quality that sets them apart', or one considered a nailed-on future classic.

Obviously, a well-to-do event like this attracts expensive classic cars driven by people with equally expensive 'eye wear'. However, Jano and his team strive for a starting line-up with as many exciting machines as possible, and more bikers have signed this year than previously. There are 34 motorcycles at the start line. Classic tackle ranges from a BMW R100RT and full-dress 1980s Honda Gold Wing to a Yamaha XS1100 and a Honda XL600R ridden by a muscular Hungarian chap called Peter. A swarm of new retros include a Yamaha XSR900 GP, Ducati Scrambler and Royal Enfield Interceptor, plus there's a spanking-new Ducati Multistrada V4 and an MV Agusta Enduro Veloce. And me, on a borrowed 2024 Yamaha Ténéré 700 Explore.

The opening ceremony is in front of the impressive Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem – the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. It's quite the sight to behold, with riders young and old chatting, talking metal, reconnecting or meeting for the first time. It's a great atmosphere, made all the better by fresh pizzas washed down with local beer. Welcome packs are distributed while a technician installs GPS trackers to each vehicle – the overall vibe is laid-back and fun, but the timing and competition elements are taken seriously. It'll also be handy to locate all the vehicles that get lost.

Tracking everyone also means that during each evening's briefing, the event's 'mother' figure Amanda, known as Mendi, can show a time-lapse of everyone's routes. Watching the erratic paths of some participants guarantees amusement (it's supposed to be anonymous, but everyone recognises themselves).

> **'I cross the border on my Yamaha using paperwork for a Ducati...'**

The route heads south-east through Hungary towards the Serbian border. Each day is classed as a separate stage, with undisclosed checkpoints, ever-changing roads and surfaces, and some fabulous landscapes. And, of course, some calamity. My loaned Yamaha immediately proves it's the perfect tool for cruising the varied roads, and it has merrily accepted all the Peli cases loaded with photography gear that I've strapped firmly to the rack. But we're barely into our week-long adventure when I realise I've lost the paperwork. I end up crossing the Hungary-Serbia border on my Yamaha using papers from an Austrian-registered Ducati Scrambler, the official fortunately not up to date on mechanical subtleties between the bikes – and not noticing that my bike's black rather than sod-off yellow.

Palms still sweaty, we head into a rainy Serbia... and get caught in an unfortunate speed check. Smiles and humbleness manage to avert disaster, and I make a mental note: start paying attention to official stuff.

Stage two takes our fabulously eclectic mix of bikes to Belgrade, the sombre concrete capital of Serbia. By the end of stage three, we've climbed to 1300m to a magnificent five-star hotel in Kopaonik, a 75-mile mountain range that runs north to south between Serbia and Kosovo. The resort's bartender is a negroni specialist. This is very welcome.

We climb higher into the mountains during stage four, where we're greeted by cold and rain. It's a tough day for us motorcyclists, but the national park and the roads are simply stunning. Even in these conditions it's impossible not to appreciate the beauty. Most of the riders are all fairly experienced and so the pace is good, just as I like it, and punctuated with delightful stops at cafés, astounding vistas – and, of course, the necessary checkpoints.

Across the border into Montenegro – yes, it's a Ducati Scrambler, honest – to explore this majestic and wild little country. It's hard to successfully describe the moments of joy and adrenaline rushes that come from riding in Montenegro's Durmitor National Park. A world heritage site, the park is laden with imposing peaks, deep canyons, lakes of perfect hue and carving waterways. It's all rather distracting, which is perhaps why I take the wrong road and spend half the day riding in the wrong direction. There's much giggling come the evening.

Riding delight continues with Croatia's flawless roads, and through deep, wild forests. We swing our way this way and that, taking the finest routes to the edge of the land at the Bay of Kotor, against the Adriatic Sea. This is where the rally officially ends with an awards ceremony, gala evening, and much tale-telling and laughter. It's been a week of two-wheeled discovery, the days packed with lasting memories. And for riders with the time – and budget – there are two extra non-competitive days that can be tacked onto the end, allowing experience of Croatia's coast, ferries, the island of Brač, and the wonderful scenery to the country's north.

The Balkan Rally isn't the cheapest event: entries for the 2025 gathering start at around £2000. But it's a unique experience that delivers on the organiser's promise that it's 'like stepping into the pages of an adventure novel and living the life of an action hero', while also managing to be sumptuous and classy. And the riding is excellent. This year's route has been smartly redesigned to make it even more tangled, skirting the stunning Lake Balaton to reach Slovenia. Once in Postojna the route will turn south, following the Croatian coastline for a breathtaking finish in Dubrovnik, a 16th-century medieval city.

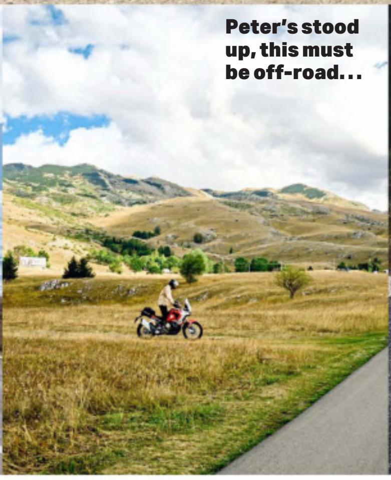
All sounds quite nice, doesn't it?

Flexible rules ensure a fine mix of metal. Vista included in entry fee

Adriatic coast road is a high point

BALKAN RALLY

Roadside ads, Balkan style (we thought *Kickstart*, too)



Peter's stood up, this must be off-road...

Should have brought your clear visors

Do the Balkan Rally 2025

Probably worse places to ride

» This year's rally capers will take in the Istrian peninsula, stopping in Motovun and Opatija before delving into the joys of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After exploring Mostar, the route will dart to the coast, with the adventure ending in the historic city of Dubrovnik. Sounds splendid. There are various options for flights, accommodation, food, and adding additional days to the trip afterwards. Find out more and book your place (be quick, they're filling up) at greatbalkanrally.com

Mr Henry Cole, February 2025, in a happy place – one of his sheds

[Inside]

The Cole shed

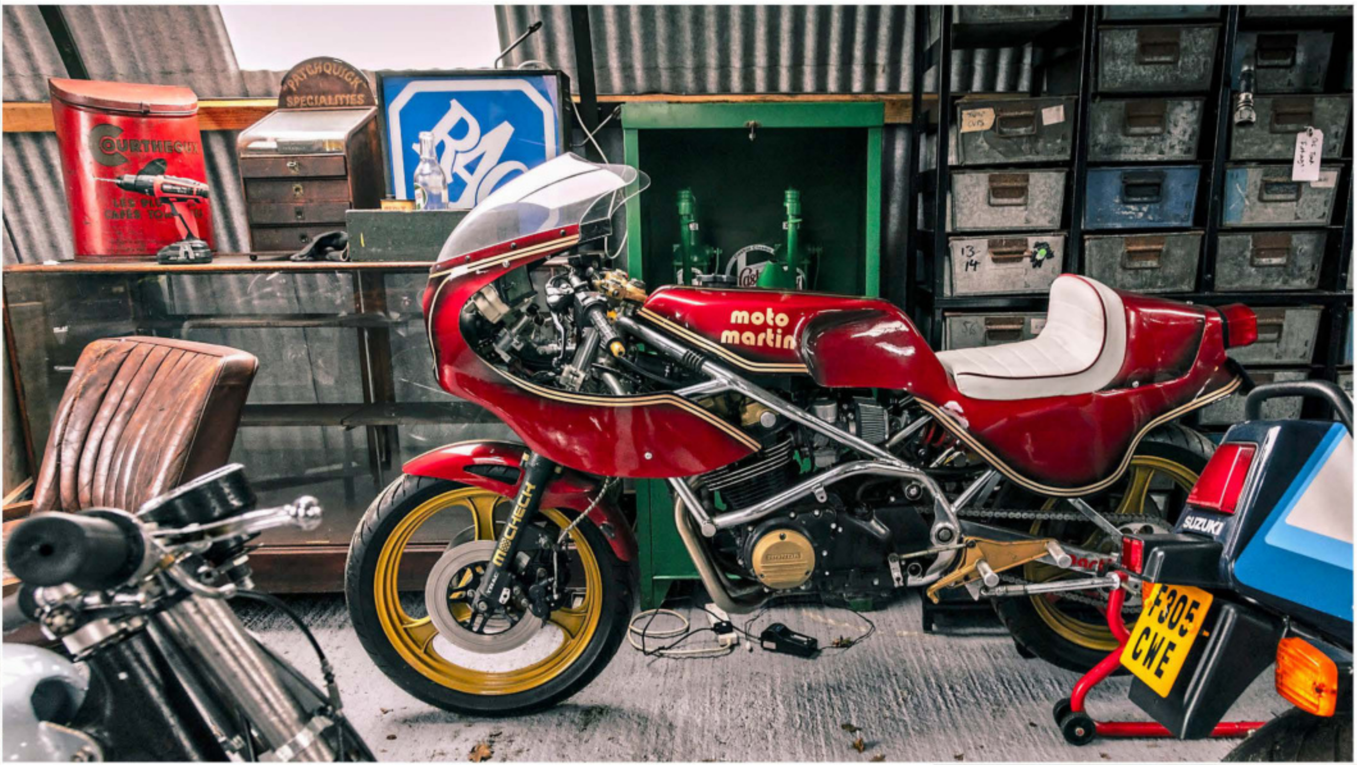
Bloke off the telly, director, record holder and proper dyed-in-the-wool biker, **Henry Cole** invites us round for a cuppa and to gawp at his collection

By **Mike Armitage** Photography **Jason Critchell**

You know him from *The Motorbike Show* and *Shed and Buried* on the telly. Away from the camera, Henry Cole is found among the gloriously eclectic mix of sportsbikes, classics, customs, outfits, retros filling his sheds… We pop in for a natter.

Lifelong biker

'Uncle Dick "Red Beard" Gladstone had a big house up in Liverpool. When I was eight he said: "Do you want to see in my shed?" We go in and there's all these old British bikes. The smell, the look. I'm in – and I hadn't even heard one run. From that moment I bought *MCN*, then started buying *Bike* from the village shop. I wore cashmere jerseys, but the people in *Bike* had long hair and beards – and I wanted to be them. I'm 61 now and must have owned 200 bikes. Maybe more, as some I've owned for 20 minutes before selling on. Actual proper long-term ownership, I've probably had 70 or 80.'



French fancy

'For me, the '70s and '80s are my biking era. We used to go to Mocheck on Clapham High Street, put our noses against the window and stare at the Moto Martins. I've got this red one, which is my "rider" and has a Honda CB1100R engine, and I've got a blue and white one with a Suzuki 1100 engine. But I'm still in search of the ultimate Moto Martin – I just have to have one with a six-cylinder Honda CBX1000 engine. I keep looking but haven't found the right one. I will find it, and just when I do, I'll be skint.

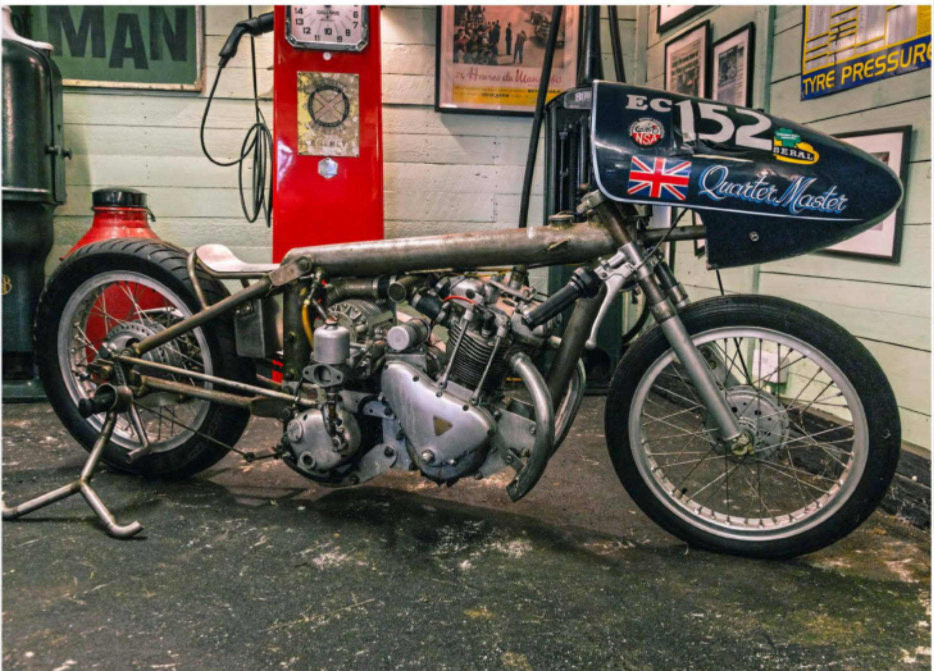
'I think Georges Martin [the French chap who founded the Moto Martin engineering company in the early 1970s] got some of his bike's styling cues slightly wrong – some of the rear ends have a sort of fin thing – but when you see this bike's monocoque styling it's quintessential late '70s/early '80s. And it rides beautifully. I've had this one for three or four years; it's great on a summer evening, although unfortunately I don't get to ride it as often as I should.'

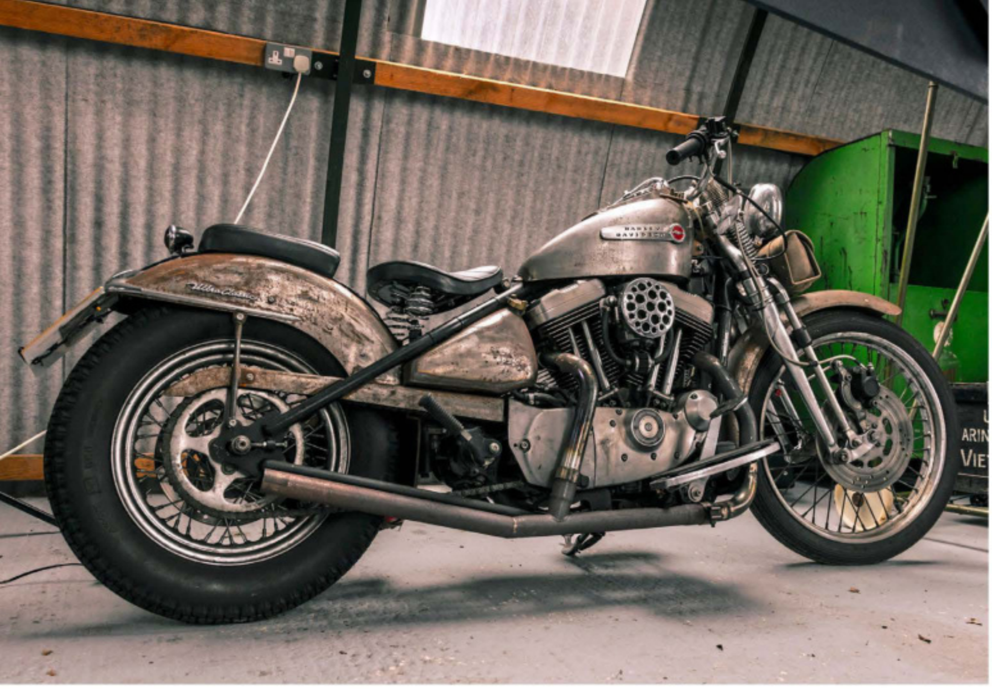
Quarter Master

'This was for *Shed and Buried*. It was built by a guy who was in the army in the Sixties – and so it's the "quarter master" in every sense. It's a twin-cylinder Triumph 500 engine with "gorilla clamps" to stop the cylinder head flying off because it's supercharged and runs on methanol. When we found it there was a very large hole in the engine's bottom end – it'd had a very large lunch at some point. We got new crankcases and rebuilt it.

'Back in the day it did 10.2sec quarter miles on the drag strip, and I've got an eighth-mile record on it at Elvington. It's loud, mean, but lovely to ride. Really. It's terrifying to anyone watching, and at a standstill as you look down the strip, but as soon as you're off and away it's so stable. Something flew off on my last ride and hit my leg, but it's due a good run out.

'But also a big part of motorcycle ownership is having a cup of tea and sitting looking at it, isn't it?'





Hacked Harley

'One of my great loves are Harley-Davidson sportsters – the older air-cooled ones, not the latest liquid-cooled bikes. Sportsters are rather like a motorcycle, just smaller. They're eminently flickable, extremely comfy, and the power delivery is smooth.

'I bought this one off a good mate of mine, Chopper Roy, for six grand. I love the way that the filler caps are like old two-gallon cans. It's really reliable, doesn't leak oil – it's my hack and it looks like shit, but it's fantastic.

'Whoever built it – and I have no idea who it was – really had attention to detail. It has an Electra Glide Ultra Classic front fender used for the rear mudguard, which is the sort of idea you have in the bath but that you never proceed with – but it's worked out really nicely.'

Street machine

'For *The Motorbike Show*, we wanted to take a bike and change the look to the vibe that we love. The challenge was not messing with Euro compliance, which meant we couldn't cut the frame at all. We looked at the Norton 961 and thought we could give it a different look – the Kawasaki Z1 is iconic to me, so we wanted that vibe and had a vision for a new tank, seat and pipe to make the 961 Street. Stuart Garner saw it and asked if he could put it into production. I said alright, but I want a grand per bike for the intellectual property. He rang me two weeks before the launch to say there was no launch as they'd sold them all. I invoiced him but that was it… The whole Garner Norton saga leaves a bitter taste. It was deeply upsetting. Luckily, I think the majority of these reached customers.'

Room for all

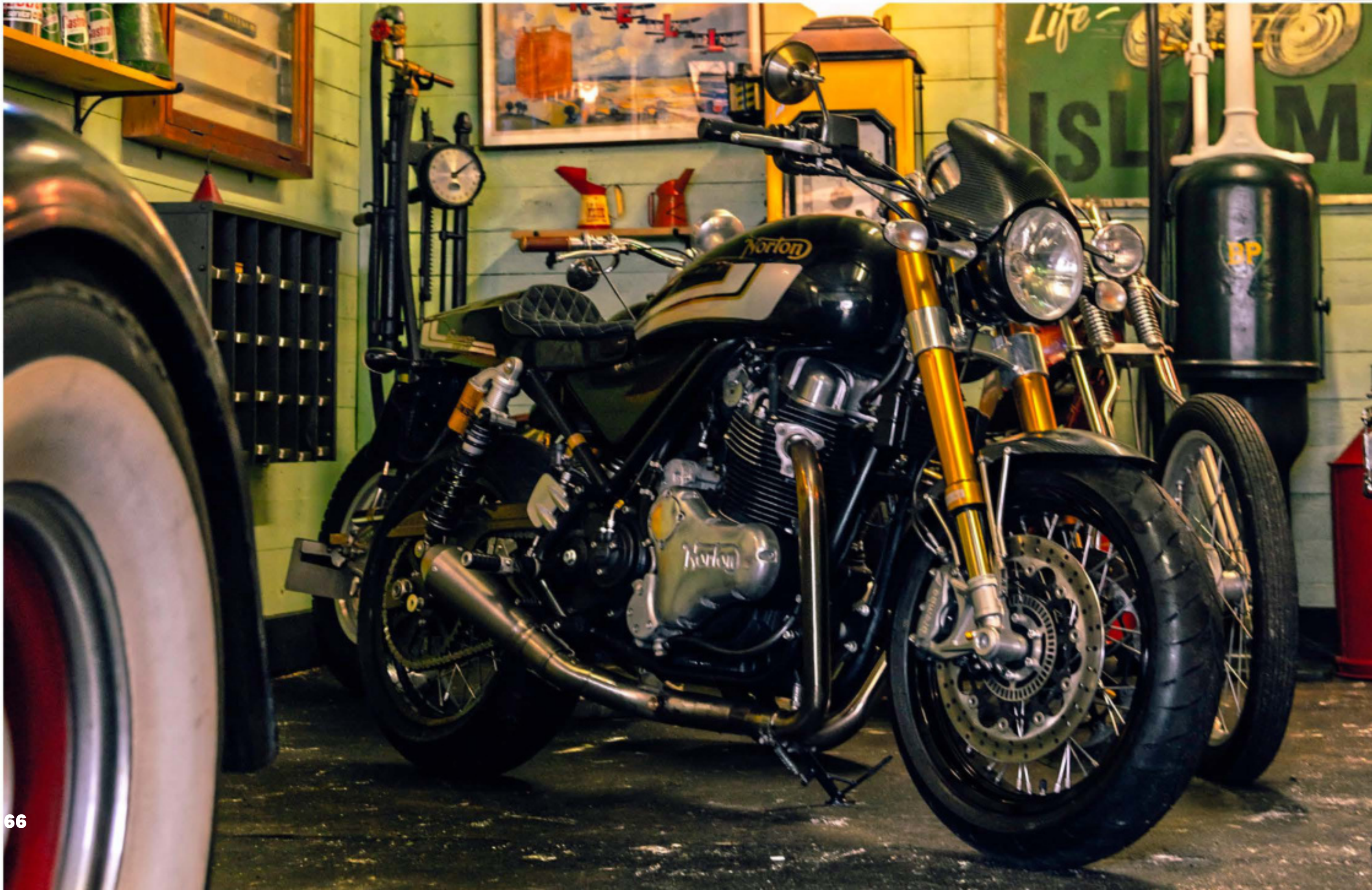
'Everyone thinks sidecars are humorous – and they are, in a brilliant way. I've had a lot of Urals and Dneprs. They used to be great value – this one was four grand. Stalin saw BMWs in theatre during the war, got his spies to nick some, and sent them to the Ural so they were out of bombing range – hence the name. They're exact copies of the BMWs. Everything's interchangeable – this one has a BMW speedo in it. The Russians then sold the blueprints to a company in China. New Urals are expensive now, though.'

Chopper. Not like that…

'It's the 80th anniversary of the Bell 47 – it first flew in December 1945. In spring '46 it was the first helicopter to get a civilian ticket to go into production. It was also the first helicopter to fly over the Alps and is in all the old Bond films. It changed the world.

'I sold my soul – well, quite a few bikes – to buy a Bell 47. There are only 12 flying in the UK, of which this is one – but there'll be 13 as we're restoring another that I found in north Wales and bought for £18,000. It's dark blue under the camo – there was an army Blue Eagles display team and it's one of them, so will be restored like that.

'They're so expensive: I've had the six-cylinder engine refurbished for £55k and rotor blades are £20k each. But if I can afford it, why don't I preserve two? It's about heritage, history, iconic design. I'll make them available – I want people at schools, fetes and events to see them. When you fly one, as I'm learning to do, it's like 3D motorcycling.'



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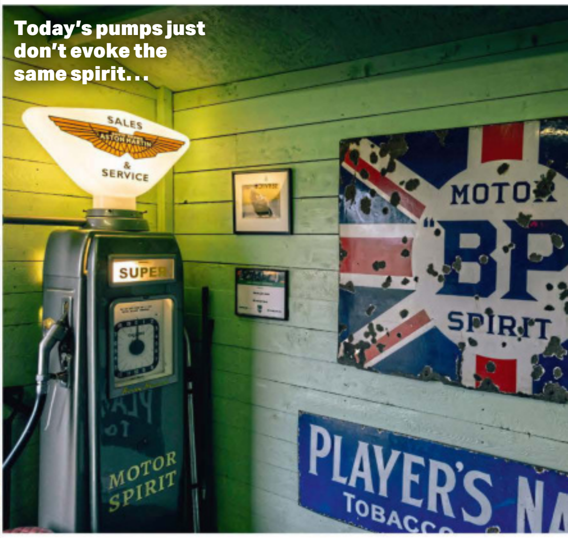


Today's pumps just don't evoke the same spirit...

SALES
SERVICE
SUPER
MOTOR SPIRIT
MOTOR
"BP"
SPIRIT
PLAYER'S NA
TOBACCO

Still the one

'When the GSX-R slabbies came out they changed the world. The 750 won everything – it was a revelation and, in my view, the first modern superbike. I had five GSX-R1100s back in the 1980s. They all got nicked. The last one I decided to run into the ground – I never washed it, and it was filthy. You could hardly see the blue. Guy Willison borrowed it one weekend and brought it back looking mint – he'd spent all Sunday washing it, polishing it. That night it got nicked. If only he'd left it...

'On this 1100 you sit in it – the tank comes out past you, and when you've got your arms wrapped around it, bum up against the single seat, looking through the screen, Vance and Hines four-into-one... come on.'

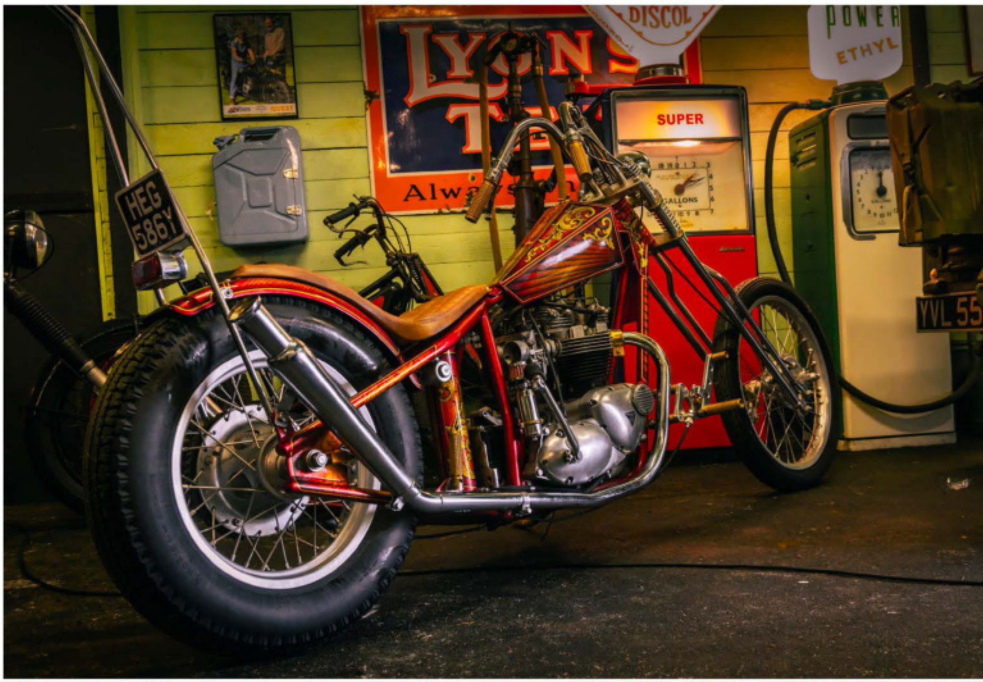
'Arms wrapped around it, bum up against the seat, looking through the screen... come on'

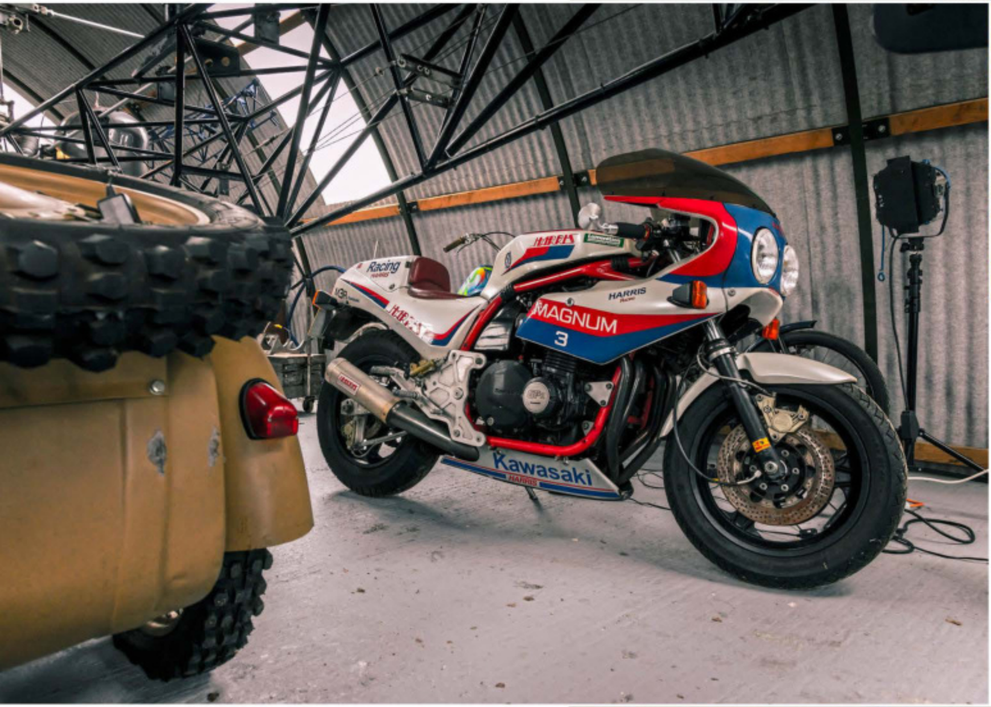
moto martin
HYPER SPORTS
GSX-R1100
SUZUKI
SUZUKI ADVANCED COOLING SYSTEM

The *other* chopper...

'To me, Uncle Bunt was a legend. John Reid was the man behind the British chopper [as seen frequently in *Bike* back in the day], and when I found this one in a shed I couldn't believe it. I got hold of John in California and he confirmed it was one of his Uncle Bunt 'mass production' frames.

'I spent £20,000 on the bike. It was awful when I got it – it's had a new front end, seat, wheels, conical rear hub, re-prepped frame, everything. It's the original engine, which we've refurbed. Any bike with rabbit-ear 'bars is an acquired taste, and your first corner is interesting… Some old rocker in town told me the trick is to pin it – just go into the corner and power on. So, I did… and it flies round corners. It's fantastic to ride once you work it out and get with the programme.'





If only I'd kept it...

'There's a bit of space at the minute, as I sold my rat Kawasaki Z400 outfit, with a Steib body on a Watsonian frame. I also sold a BMW R90 with a kneeler sidecar. The one that got away? My Brough 11.50 – I had to sell it for stamp duty on the farm, but if I get the opportunity to buy an 11.50 or SS80 at the right price, I'm there. There's a couple of Triumph bobbers and choppers that I'd like back too, though I've just reignited my passion for slab-sided GSX-Rs…'

Best of British

'Though we used to look at Moto Martins, we also used to read about bikes using Harris frames – and to me a Harris the most iconic of British superbikes.

'British engineering, with brilliant frame geometry and styling, and a Japanese lump – what's not to like? You get heritage and culture with handling, reliability and performance. The four-cylinder Kawasaki GPz1100 engine is a perfect marriage with the Harris frame, and it flies.

'I found this Harris Magnum in a florist in London, and bought it from a very nice guy selling daffodils. It had been there a while but I think he used to ride it. I've done nothing but fit a bar-end mirror – just the one, but I need to see what's behind. I paid £12,000, and it's the best twelve grand I've ever spent… apart from all the other bikes.'

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> ‘A big part of motorcycle ownership is sitting looking at them, isn’t it?’

See Henry...

This year Henry Cole has a theatre tour with Steve Parrish, with 16 dates already confirmed across the UK between March and November. Check the dates and locations and book your tickets by clicking your way to henrycole.tv

Found in a hedge

‘This is a Triumph 350, and I hold a record for a Triumph 3HW engine at Elvington – 88mph or 98mph, I think. The bike has more to go. I found this dustbin fairing in a hedge doing *Find It, Fix It, Flog it*. The guy had sold a Vincent Black Shadow to a bloke who didn’t want the dustbin fairing – so before he put the bike in a van he threw the fairing in a hedge. Forty years later, I find it and pay £100. I haven’t run the bike with the dustbin fairing – Allen Millyard and I reckon it’ll go slower. I want to take it to Bonneville and try for a record. Bonneville is the “big white dyno” as the altitude robs speed. The atmosphere changes all day too, so you’re constantly rejetting the carburettors. I think dustbin fairings are banned at Bonneville, though – something to do with fuel vapour getting trapped, or crosswinds…’

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ROAD TRIP SPECIAL

Mountains & magical twists

Australia: flat straight roads, tourist traffic and speeding paranoia. Except as **Simon Weir** discovers, that's very much not the case

Words and photography **Simon Weir**

Italy? Sweden? No, it's Australia. Preconceptions shattered

'It's going to be 42 degrees in the city,' says Damo. 'You should be alright down on the coast, though.' I hope so. It had been mid-30s when I arrived in Melbourne and that was plenty warm enough for me.

England's inability to shake off winter had been getting me down. My brother's over in Australia and says it's quite warm. So, a last-minute flight and I'm standing in Seven Hills in northern Sydney, looking at a brand-new BMW R1250GS Adventure. 'It's the last one in the country,' confides Brian of BikeRoundOz. 'We don't normally buy Adventures, but they have to make space for the new 1300, so the deal on this was too good to turn down…'

A brand-new Adventure for my adventure around the 'island continent'? Perfect. My luggage goes in one pannier and my waterproofs (just in case) go in the top box, along with my sunglasses. I pair my phone to the bike, poke a destination into the BMW Connected Ride app and I'm off…

I'm going the wrong way. Deliberately. Logic says leave the city through the nearby Blue Mountains National Park, but I'm heading south through the heart of Sydney. I want to tick off a few sights – the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House – even though I'm starting to think the waterproofs may be called into play. Aussie driving in the big cities is not quite like British driving. It's not like Italian driving, either… but only because everyone's paranoid about getting nicked for speeding. There's still lots of random lane switching, turning without indicating, the occasional bit of hooting and gesturing – but it's in slow motion compared with riding across Naples.

Things get better as I break out of the south side of the sprawling city. The sky gets brighter and bluer, the traffic gets lighter and, turning into the Royal National Park, the road gets twistier – and definitely non-European. I'm cutting through a landscape of wattle and eucalyptus, sun-bleached grass and stumpy, spiky things that could

be cacti. Bursting out of the bush at Bald Hill Lookout, the ocean sparkles to the left and cliffs rise ahead. The road dips down to the serpentine Sea Cliff Bridge that hugs the rocks above the waves. Before tackling it, I grab a 'robber dog' – hot dog and onions – from the cart at the viewpoint and drink two bottles of water. Yes, it's warm.

My overnight stop is at Hyams Beach on Jervis Bay, about 120 miles south of Sydney. My brother and his family are already here, having hired a holiday house that has a room for me, a barbecue and the most amazing white-sand bay on its doorstep. It's pretty heavenly. Stopping here gives me a chance to rejig my rough route and call a few friends to catch up along the way.

Into the mountains

The next stage of the trip is magic. I take the Princes Highway (a flowing two-lane road rather than a dual carriageway) then swing inland, heading for Canberra on the King's Highway. This is a truly regal ride, rising and falling through the forest with every kind of corner.

I grab lunch in Bungendore (insert Harry Potter joke here) then swing past the capital, heading south to pick up the Snowy Mountains Highway. This is epic, with steep climbs and – when the trees part – huge views glimpsed out over a landscape rumpled like a badly laid lawn. Not that I have too much time to admire the views: the corners are coming thick, fast and fairly tight. It's an invigorating ride.

It's also a long one – and frankly by 5pm I'm wondering if I've bitten off more than I can chew. I'm staying in Wagga Wagga (maybe I'll retire here and open a tea shop called Cuppa Cuppa) but there's no respite from the sun as I drop out of the mountains, still with a fair way to go. I thank my lucky stars that I'm on the super-comfortable Adventure – and even more glad for the 30-litre tank, as there are some huge gaps between petrol stations.

From Wagga Wagga I'm heading back into the mountains, albeit after an hour of dual carriageway to reach Albury. Then it's down along Lake Hume to pick up the amazing Omeo Highway. Like a man who's lost his thesaurus, I have no words to describe how good it is. There are straights, there are bends, there are climbs and descents. There are gorges and forests and fields… it has everything, in perfect balance. But the best thing about it is that, after coffee and a caramel slice in Omeo, it leads to the B500, the Great Alpine Road. It hits 1840m, making it Australia's highest road. A lot of it is straighter than the Omeo Highway, climbing steadily to Hotham Heights like a roller coaster rattling upwards… and then the brakes are off, roaring down and up and down again, jinking left and right above the treeline until it hits 'The Meg', the final steep descent to Harrietville.

After a day like that, the fear is always that the next one will be an anticlimax. Yet within the first few miles, I know it's going to match it. Heading out through Bright and Mount Buffalo, over the lake at Bonnie Doon, I'm feeling the serenity. From Yarck to Marysville is good… and then I'm into the Yarra Ranges National Park. This is thick forest: wild and fragrant, baking in the heat. The riding is pretty hot and wild too, especially when I hit the Reefton Spur. It's like someone laid a go-kart track through the set of *Jurassic Park*. Twisty doesn't even begin to cover it. This is pretty much relentless 90° corners through the rainforest for a dizzying 20 miles. It's a fabulous final ride before hitting Melbourne.

NO ENTRY
ONE WAY
GS TROPHY

Kangaroos chasing wombats, chasing deer? The risks sure are different down under
HIGH RISK AREA
NEXT 22 km

That 30-litre tank comes in handy in areas like this

A masterpiece, and the Sydney Opera House

82
80
km/h
2096 km
ROAD
N
157 km
03:36 PM
3.1 km
Otway Lighthouse Road
+40 °C
01:12 PM
BMW MOTORRAD

Forget the architecture, Simon. Do as your shirt says. Above: vented kit essential

Things about down under

» Speeding

Speed limits in Australia vary – from 80kph up to 100kph (110kph on main highways). What doesn't vary is the outlook of the police, which is strict. There's almost no leeway – try taking a British extra 10 per cent and you'll get a big fine.

Although it's a huge country with not many people, the old bill also seem to be good at hiding where they'll catch speeders. Over the Australia Day weekend they're out in force – and it's 'double demerits' (points) for anyone stopped. Which means the locals are looking at their speedos more than where they're going…

» Australia Day

This is 26 January, commemorating the establishment of the first colony in Sydney in 1788. As with all things colonial, there's now a frisson of controversy about it (critics call it 'invasion day'). However, as my family were settlers on the First Fleet, I think it's rather nice to have a public holiday to celebrate great-grandad's boat trip.

» Practicalities

Brits travelling to Australia need a passport valid for the length of their stay and a visa. You can apply online for a free one that will let you stay for up to three months at a time (just Google 'Australia eVistor visa'). There are strict rules on what you can bring into the country so check gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice before packing. Flights are expensive, and generally twice as expensive from the UK to Australia than the other way. Best to book early, shop around and be flexible with your dates, if you can, to save some quids. As you're looking at 24 hours on a plane, if you can afford premium economy, it's definitely worth it.

The Aussie summer is over UK winter – and it's fiercely hot from Christmas to Australia Day. Things are likely to be more bearably hot in November or from mid-February to March. It's very much a dry heat in the red centre but a little more humid on the coast… unless you head to Queensland, which gets really sticky and wet.

> **'It's very much a dry heat in the red centre but a little more humid on the coast'**

Speeding?
STOP IT... OR COP IT.
oh!

Is that a billboard, or an actual copper?

Great Ocean Road. Even greater without tourist traffic

> ‘Giant GS feels the edges of its tyres on hot tarmac as it scrapes through tight turns’

Renting a ride

I hired my bike from BikeRoundOz. They have bases in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and Cairns. They’re the country’s biggest hire outfit, with a large fleet of bikes. They also run guided tours and can provide self-guided trips if you don’t want to do your own thing. Good guys. Recommended.

bikeroundoz.com

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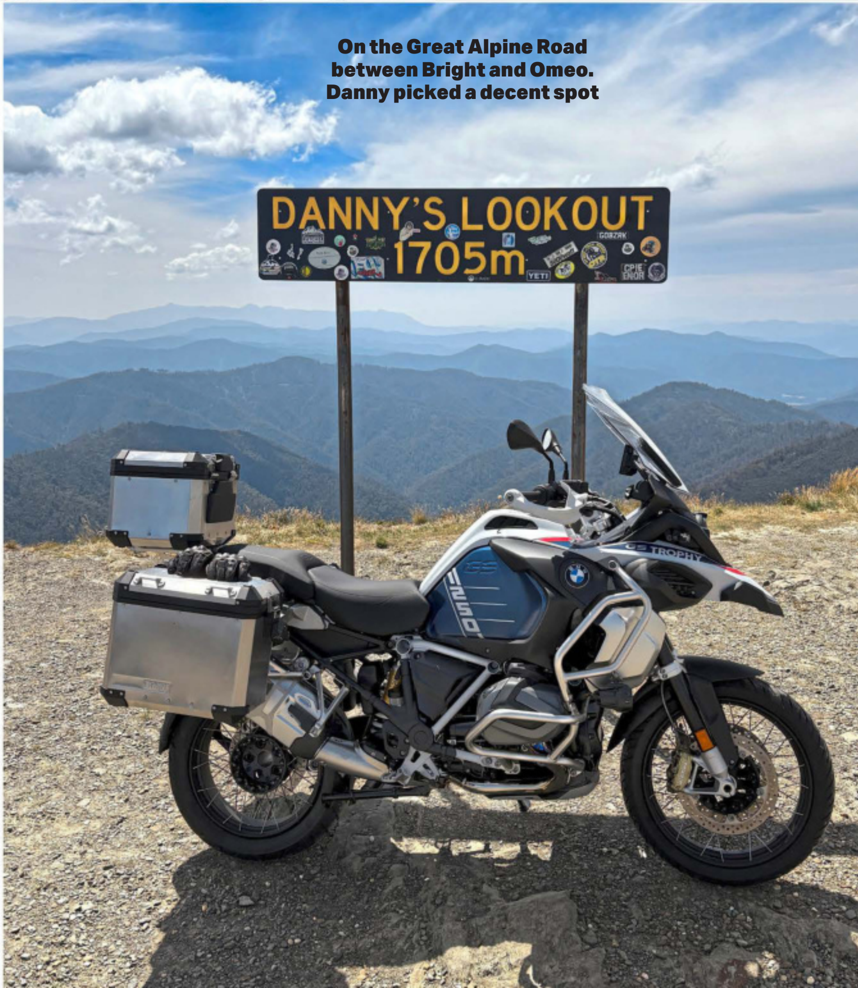
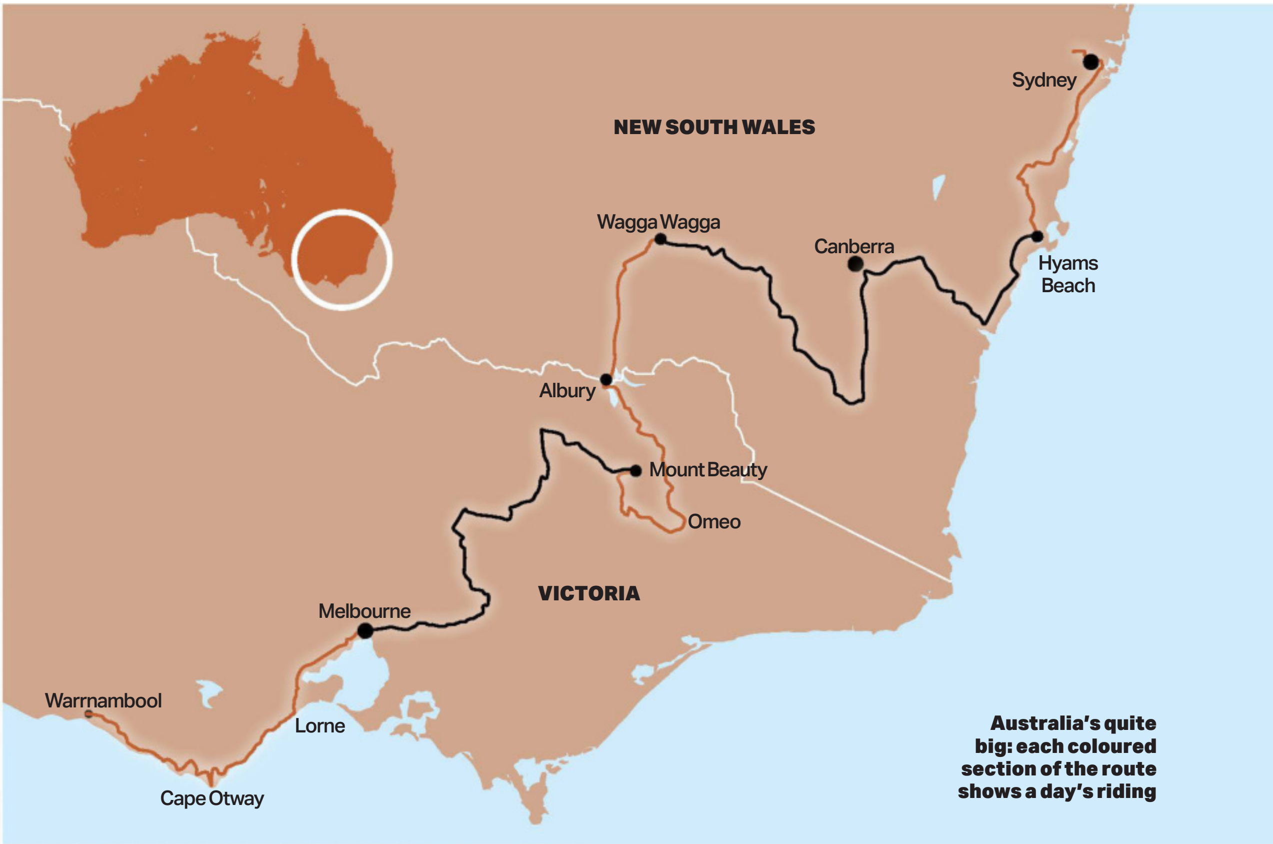


On the Great Alpine Road between Bright and Omeo. Danny picked a decent spot



Australia's quite big: each coloured section of the route shows a day's riding

NEXT
15 km
REDUCE
SPEED

Back to the ocean

You can't beat a bit of local knowledge and my mate Damo's advice is to make an early start. Not only because of the heat but also because it's Australia Day, so the Great Ocean Road is likely to get busy.

I take the freeway to Geelong then head towards Torquay – then turn around. The road is clogged with tourist traffic. What have I done? I opt to bypass the town, picking up the Great Ocean Road by Bells Beach and heading down through Anglesea. It's overcast, bringing worries of dealing with rain as well as day trippers.

By the time I get to Lorne, the grey clouds have vanished – and so have most of the tourists. Now we have some real riding to do, the giant GS feeling the edges of its tyres on hot tarmac as it scrapes through tight turns dropping down towards the sea. There's mile after mile of this – all the way to Apollo Bay, where I grab lunch in a brewery (obviously). Things get even quieter after that, with barely a half-dozen overtakes between me and the Cape Otway lighthouse. I stop to take a picture of the bike in the primordial forest and as I put my lid on, a feathery dinosaur – or emu – emerges from the bush 10m away. It glares menacingly then, rather than going full Rod Hull on me, turns and stalks off before I can get my camera out again.

There are signs of the impending tourist apocalypse as I continue along the road, with guard rails and tape and 'warning: congestion' signs… but there's hardly any traffic. It is busy at the Twelve Apostles, but it always is. The Bay of Martyrs and London Bridge are quiet – and frankly I have a fabulous ride all the way to Warrnambool.

I give Damo a call that night to thank him for his advice. Getting out early made it the perfect ride – just one more brilliant ride on a road trip packed full of amazing tarmac. 'And not so hot as Melbourne?' he asks. That's right, I confirm: only 40 degrees…

It'll be too slow...

The new **Honda GB350S** has half the power of a Triumph Speed 400. But it also has superb quality, delivers simple joy, and is incredible value…

There it is, look. Read it again, to make sure: 'Made in Japan.' Not a declaration seen on a small Honda for a while, and not one made anywhere else in the world of smaller-capacity motorcycles. Triumph, Royal Enfield and KTM build theirs in India; others favour China for the balance of spec and price.

Does it matter? Not really. Triumph, Enfield or whoever use the same materials, processes and standards regardless of what country the factory is in. But seeing 'Japan' on the new GB350S gives an indication of how important the model is to Honda (just like when they launched the NC700X). A typical functional, clean Japanese design, very little looks or feels cheap – yet it only costs £3949. The GB350S gives the impression that keeping it clean and checking the oil is all it'll require to keep it thrupping along for the next 40 years.

It's a 350 single... is it a bit steady?

Yes. But also no. While the 21 lb.ft, 21bhp, 348cc two-valve motor leaves shoulders firmly in sockets, it's enough to whip the speedo needle smartly.

The air-cooled single chugs through widely spaced gears with a sense of a heavy crank and long stroke, just like the '60s/'70s bikes it takes cues from. It supplies a little joy with every throttle opening, and doesn't call your left foot into action too often.

Sounds decent too – not a proper single thump thanks to emissions regs, but a solid doof-doof that lets you know this is more than a cheapo learner bike. This box-fresh test bike does 63mpg too, including the artificial environment of a photoshoot; once loosened up expect more than 70mpg.

SPECIFICATIONS

Price £3949 **Engine** 348cc 2V SOHC single **Power** 21bhp **Torque** 21 lb.ft **Top speed** 85mph (est) **Rake/trail** 27°/120mm **Wheelbase** 1440mm **Kerb weight** 178kg (claimed) **Seat height** 800mm **Tank size** 15 litres **Economy** 63mpg (tested) **Colours** grey, black or blue **Availability** wade in

***Bike* verdict** Convincing mix of feel, quality, looks and price. They'll sell out.

Bike rating 9/10

Proportions and style are spot on; looks almost custom from some angles

Toot and wink – it's all you need

won't it?

Have they cut corners in how it rides?

Nope. The GB350S doesn't feel cut-price, and the chassis is on the sprightly rather than stable side. It's agile, balanced, and lets you fling it around a little. Honda have a knack for giving handling that suits any rider and setting suspension perfectly for the application, and the GB350S has easy balance allowing you to use all of its huge steering lock. It doesn't flop into turns or resist efforts to change course either – it does as it's told, every time, and the simple forks and unadjustable twin shocks belie their unimpressive appearance. The suspension's damped with Baby Bear's porridge: not too harsh, not too soft. Just right.

Crucially, the Honda is on good rubber too – Metzeler Tourance – rather than the unknown fitments on some Enfields and others. It's confident on slimy, wintry roads. There's ABS (basic, but not grievously intrusive) and traction control (that can be switched off), but there's no real need for it as the power is gentle enough. Getting into a situation where you'd need TC would be some feat.

Can I connect my phone?

Anti-skid systems aside, you get no modern distractions. The GB is better for it, not least the switchgear: some big Hondas have buttons all over the shop, but all the 350 presents is a start/kill and hazards on the right 'bar, and indicators and horn on the left. Contrary to most bikes the horn is above the winkers, but it soon makes sense.

The LCD display tucked at the bottom of the instruments has a trip meter, fuel consumption and range. All you need. Oh, and a clock. It's refreshing – no farting around trying to get your phone to talk to the bike, fussing over modes or mulling over display options.

Better than a Triumph Speed 400?

Define 'better'. The bestselling Speed has almost double the power, feels sportier and has more tech. But it's also £1246 more (though the difference on finance is less pronounced), and if you want retro the Speed's link to the past is less convincing given modern cycle parts and liquid cooling. The Honda has greater easy-going appeal, like Enfield's Meteor and HNTR. It's great in an open-face lid, breezing down back roads belting out *Sunshine, Lollipops and Rainbows*. Or slicing up a town. Or looking 'right' outside the pub. And the GB has something more – there's classiness from that tank badge. Despite Triumph's and Enfield's quality, there's reassurance – satisfaction at least – in a bike built at home by a firm with 75 years of experience in doing it right. We'll put it head to head with rivals next issue...

> 'Very little looks or feels cheap – yet it only costs £3949'

You can get more widgets on other bikes. But they don't feel classy like the 'onda

No calls, no directions, no Spotify. Just ride it and have fun. Perfect

In search of

This isn't some AI depiction of motorcycling in Middle Earth. This is China. And it's spectacular

Shangri-La

Sneaking through tolls, run-ins with police, broken toes… and breathtaking riding. **Martin Bissig** rides south-western China on a Kove 500X

Words and photography **Martin Bissig**

My arms ache. The concentration taken to get here has been immense, and going back down again will be truly challenging on the narrow, slippery trails. But it's more than worth it for this vantage at nearly 4000 metres, opening onto a world of jagged peaks and drifting clouds.

This is China. Whatever your expectations for the country, it probably doesn't include snaking mountain roads, remote villages perched on cliffs, breathtaking panoramas of snow-capped peaks, and of course brilliant riding. I'd been in Chongli working in summer 2023 and made friends with Ibin. His English was excellent – still

嘎丹松赞林寺 Gaden Dhondupling

A tad more extravagant than the toll gates on the M25...

a rarity in China – and as we relaxed after a long day, he showed me amazing photos from a motorcycle trip he'd taken. By that night I'd already texted my friends Thomas, Oliver and Ralf back in Switzerland: 'Guys, what if we rode through China next autumn?' Their enthusiastic responses sealed it. We set the date for October 2024.

Planning a big ride in China wasn't straightforward. Mobile payments, translation apps, and temporary driver's licences all posed challenges. We learned that you can't simply show up with your international licence; you must register at a police station and apply for a temporary Chinese licence. Even with Ibin's help, we struggled to find an official translation agency and at one point realised the stamp on our licences was invalid – news that arrived as we were flying out of Beijing. Fortunately, we solved it at the last minute, but this critical mistake nearly restricted us to renting only cars, and not motorbikes...

From Lijiang to Shangri-La

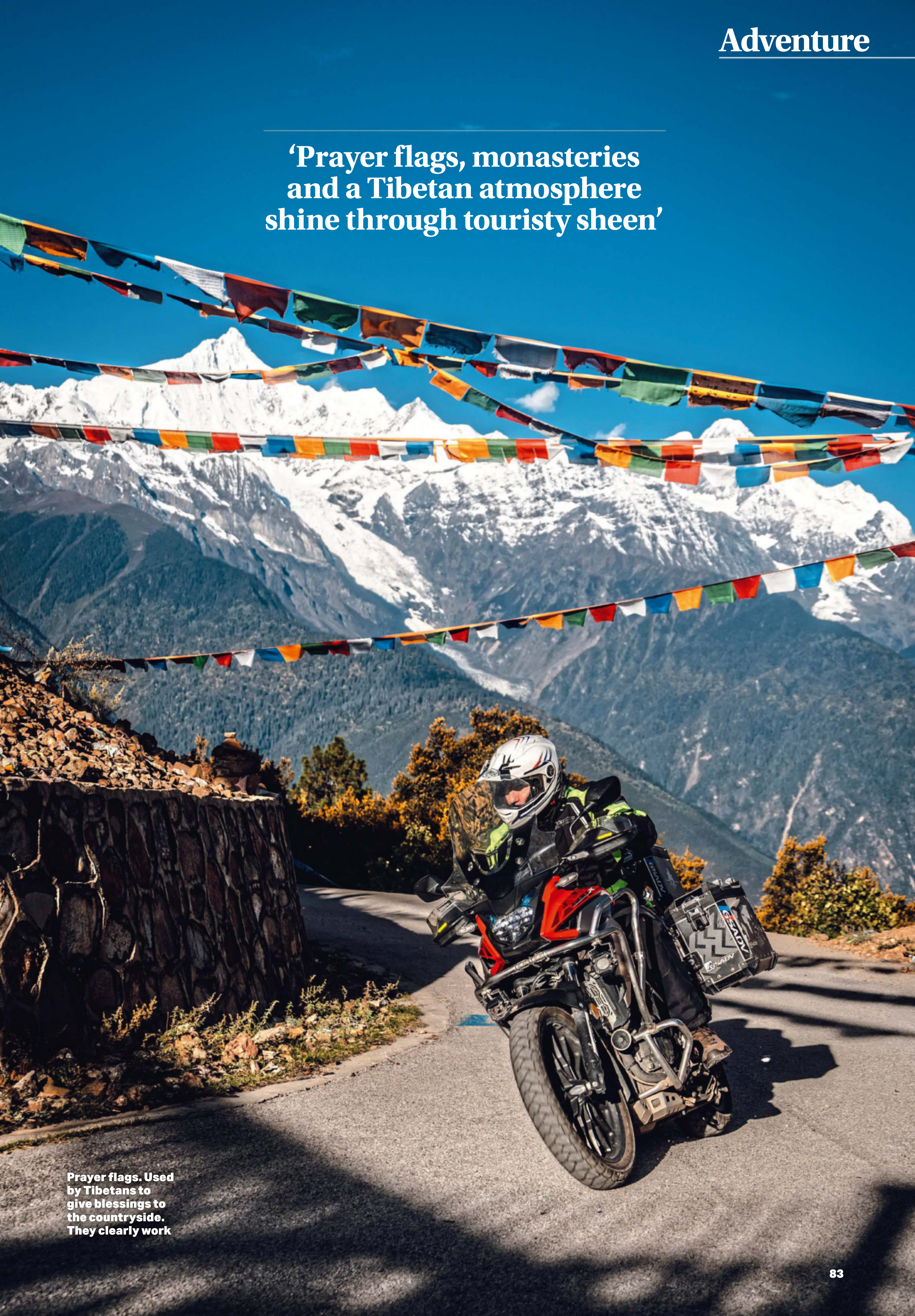
Ibin greeted us at the airport in Lijiang, and the following day we went to pick up our bikes at a local rental shop: three Chinese-made Kove 500Xs and a Honda CB500X. We gave them a once-over (and tightened a few screws...) and attached our luggage. Paperwork was unexpectedly lax: no formal ID checks, no deposits, no questions asked. For Western riders like us, it felt surreal; yet it also gave a refreshing sense of freedom.

Lijiang sits at 2400m above sea level, and we needed to prepare for huge altitude swings on this trip – we'd be going maybe as high as 4700m before plunging into subtropical valleys. Temperatures could range from a pleasant 25°C to below freezing. We left the city excited, but also a little anxious for the adventure ahead.

Our first leg was about 200km on well-maintained expressways. We could sneak through the toll booths without paying – a small perk for motorcyclists – and traffic was minimal due to the high toll fees for cars. The road climbed steadily. Before long, a massive golden stupa came into view – a sign we were entering Tibetan territory. We arrived in the city officially called Shangri-La around noon.

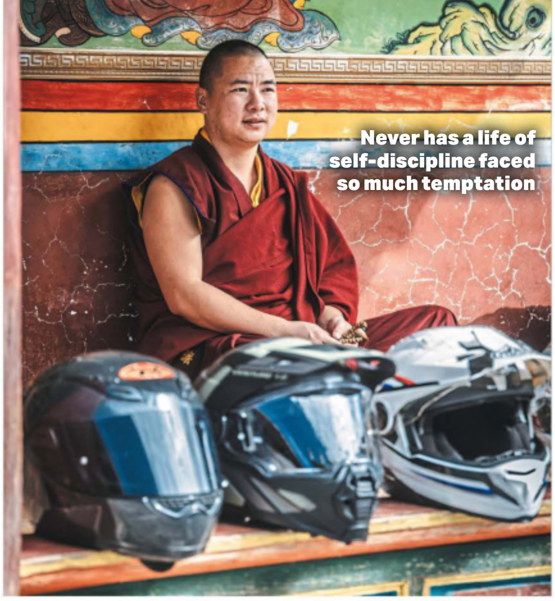
Once a quiet Tibetan town, Shangri-La now bustles with Chinese tourists. However, traditional prayer flags, monasteries and a distinctly Tibetan atmosphere shone through the touristy sheen. Tucked among modern cafés and shops were temples and chanting monks, reminding us of the city's deep cultural roots. Determined to witness a less commercialised side of Shangri-La, we rose before dawn the following day to visit Songzanlin Monastery, with Ibin suggesting a side road that might

The universal language of bimbling with your mates. Lids optional



‘Prayer flags, monasteries and a Tibetan atmosphere shine through touristy sheen’

Prayer flags. Used by Tibetans to give blessings to the countryside. They clearly work



Never has a life of self-discipline faced so much temptation

Just when you think you've seen every condition...

let us bypass the tourist checkpoint. It worked – we slipped past an unmanned gate and arrived at the lake in front of the monastery minutes before sunrise. In freezing cold, we scrambled up a small hill adorned with prayer flags – and as the sun clawed its way over the horizon the monastery's golden roofs and the misty lake glowed under warm, early light.

Meili Snow Mountains

Souls stirred, we set off for the Meili Snow Mountains. The riding was smooth and flowing at first, but the roads soon filled with trucks and buses – this was the main artery from Yunnan province to Tibet. Tunnels plunged us into darkness, thick with diesel fumes, so we veered onto a less-travelled route: a 4320m pass topped with gravel roads. It was my first real off-road experience on a motorcycle (or at least non-tarmac experience). My heart pounded, stones rattling under the Kove, but the view at the summit erased all fears with jagged snowy peaks stretching into the horizon.

Reaching a town called Felasi, we settled into a café with glass walls framing the mountains. Even in October, clouds often shroud the highest summits, but luck was on our side the following morning, the peaks emerging in full glory at sunrise, tinted gold in the clear sky. We weren't alone, though – drones buzzed overhead and Chinese tourists snapped away in traditional costumes, so we left the main viewing terrace for a quieter vantage. With colourful flags dancing in the crisp air, everyone stood in awe, memories indelibly made, hearts full.

Our route doubled back, descending to the Yangtze River at a warmer 2000m elevation. We shed our jackets and gloves, amazed at how drastically conditions had shifted. Steering away from the more-travelled routes again, we followed Ibin into remote Sichuan. Heavy summer rains had left debris and gravel across the tarmac, and there was some careful path-picking as we climbed another 4700m pass, each kilometre demanding focus on precarious switchbacks. On the far side, the unpaved descent really tested our skills as the light faded.

When we finally pulled into the tiny village of Chini it was nearly nightfall. High in the mountains of Sichuan, the village only recently became accessible by road and Western visitors were rare despite interest stirred by Chinese social media. We crammed into a family's guest house; dinner was momos (Tibetan dumplings) and fresh bread, and their hospitality and laughter around the fire eased the day's exhaustion. We borrowed their daughter's room for night – there was no heating, just thick blankets and our woolly hats for warmth.

Road of
Shangri-la
香格里拉圣路
46

Encounters on the Tibetan Plateau

Our attempt to reach a nearby temple the following day was scuppered by a closed road. However, we wound up chatting to a group of Tibetan men on a plateau. They only spoke minimal Mandarin, but via the magic of hand gestures and the few Tibetan words Ibin knew, we learned about a small trail leading to a scenic viewpoint.

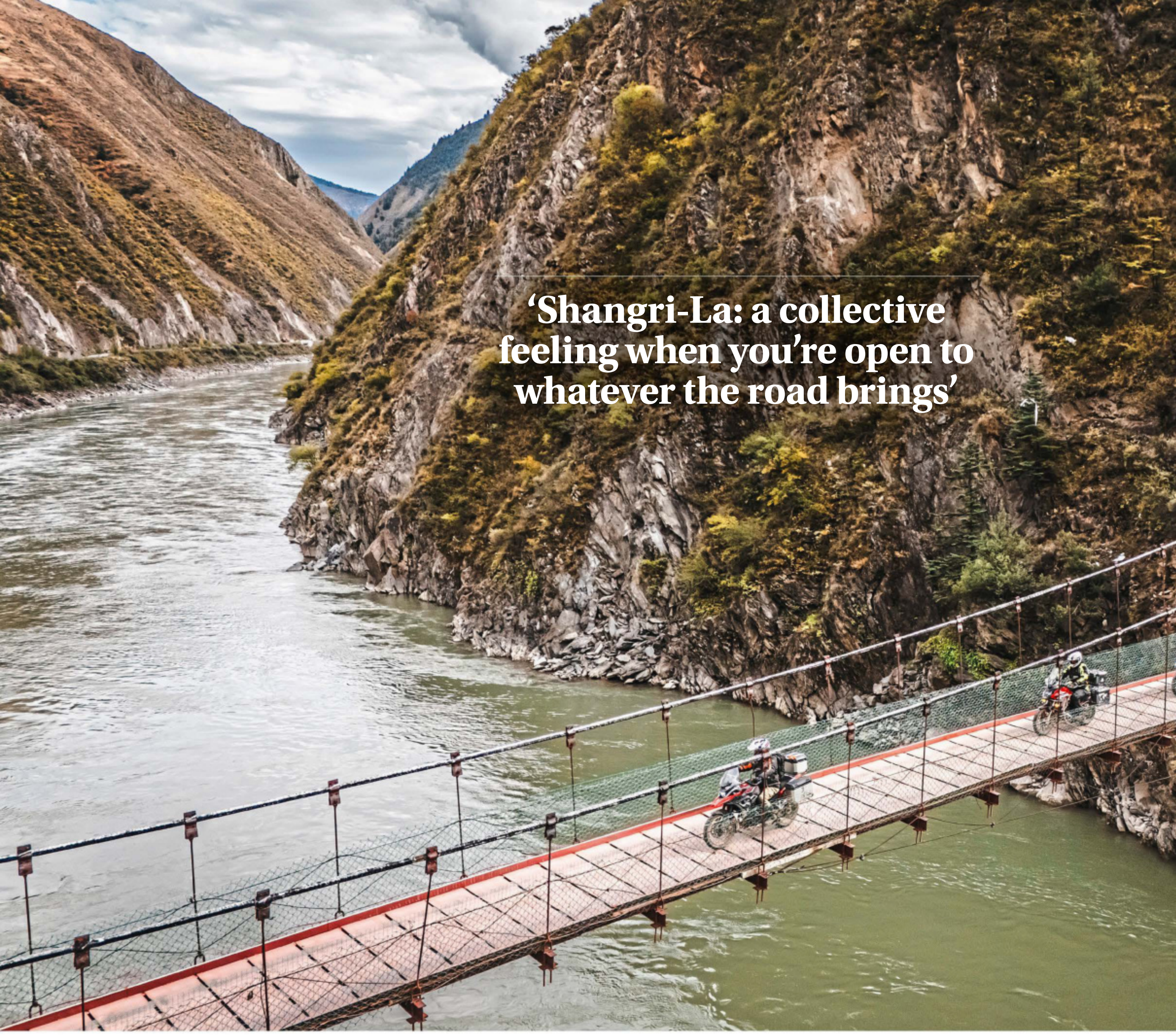
We paid a small toll and found ourselves tackling rocky climbs beneath evergreen forests. And now we're at the 4000m-high vantage point, watching soft clouds meander across the serrated mountain tops. Truly amazing.

Our breath taken, we eventually pull ourselves away and set sights on Yarchen Gar. This is a famed monastery city that a friend had described as a sea of red-roofed huts, but as we near police checkpoints are blocking foreign visitors. We find ourselves being escorted away by stern officers – communication is difficult, tensions run high, and our passports

Wait, where did the snow go? Ah well, at least you can see the big rocks

'To add further excitement we wake to a white duvet of snow eight inches deep'

The bikes, the smiles, the friendships, the scenery. Perfection



‘Shangri-La: a collective feeling when you’re open to whatever the road brings’

are taken as we’re told we have to leave the region. Immediately. In the end, they return our documents at a hotel outside the restricted zone, and that’s that. But it’s a bit unnerving. And there’s no Yarchen Gar for us.

To add further excitement, we wake the following morning to snow. Not a light dusting but a white duvet that’s eight inches deep. This has closed the pass we planned to cross – or at least it’s closed to cars. They’re letting motorcycles through. Riding in snow is a whole new challenge: traction vanishes, and wheels slew on slushy tracks. Yet despite frigid altitudes and the treacherous surfaces, we’re soon descending again, the land shifting back to green valleys. Arriving in the Tibetan city of Litang, a new unpranged bike is delivered for Ibin – he’d taken a small injury-free tumble earlier on an open trail, so they sent a fresh bike. We warm ourselves in a restaurant, sipping steaming hot pot soup as we reflect on the unpredictability of China’s south-western roads.

The long way to Lugu Lake

Hoping to ride to Lugu Lake, it’s getting late as we set out from Litang. The riding is fine until we hit a tight hairpin turn on a gravel-smothered road. My front wheel slides out, sending the bike down and me along with it. Over the

Forget replacing the plastics – in China they send you a different bike

A very welcome sight. Mine’s an espresso, please

Ooh, a bridge. Onwards – there's more to discover

Oops. Maybe should have closed the visor before entering the water

Made it. Now to enjoy it all again the other way – hurrah!

Won't be mistaken for Stoke-on-Trent anytime soon

intercom, my friends asked if I'm okay. 'It hurts, but let's keep going,' I respond – there's piercing pain in my foot but I'm determined to reach Lugu Lake before dark.

I spend the next few hours in a haze of pain and worry. If my foot is broken, how will I continue – and what about my work when I return home? My foot's throbbing and it's night by the time we reach our destination, and all I want is a shower and rest. Morning reveals Lugu Lake's calm beauty, but I can't do the planned loop around its shores. I can barely walk.

Instead, we head back to Lijiang… and out of nowhere, my bike's clutch starts failing. Determined not to stop because that means stalling, I time traffic light crossings with help from Ralf via our intercom, coasting through as they turn green. It works, but by the time we reach the hotel my nerves are shot from a few close calls with traffic. An investigation in the hotel car park shows it's just a loose adjustment screw and a quick fix. The comedy is not lost on us.

Next day, I visit a local hospital. Within 15 minutes and for the equivalent of about £10, an X-ray confirms a broken big toe. 'No surgery needed,' chirps the doctor with a reassuring nod. I hobble out on undersized crutches and rejoined the group for a final dinner.

Finding our own Shangri-La

On our final night we gather in a cosy restaurant, sampling all manner of Chinese and Tibetan specialties. Over steaming plates we recount our biggest 'wow' moments: crossing Himalayan passes, sharing momos with new Tibetan friends, sneaking into Songzanlin at sunrise, the astounding vistas, even the comedic run-ins with police. Each twist has shaped our two-week road trip in ways we never could have predicted.

Yes, I've broken my toe. Ibin crashed. We missed seeing Yarchen Gar. But none of this diminishes the adventure. We've discovered places few Westerners know, felt the warmth of remote communities, and re-learned that the best experiences often come from the unplanned. As Ibin says with a grin: 'Sometimes you have to take detours to discover what's truly important.'

When I first imagined riding China's south-western mountains, I pictured a single highlight: the Shangri-La from books and postcards. But in truth, the ride itself held the magic – shared laughs at roadside stalls, chance encounters on hidden trails, and the camaraderie of four friends under big skies. In the end, Shangri-La wasn't one place on the map but a collective feeling when you're open to whatever the road brings.

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Advice, guidance and things to do with bikes

KNOW HOW

BIKES

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Thing of the month

XCP Rust Blocker £14.99

Woo-hoo, it's spring! However, while the roads may have dried I suspect my local council's stock of road salt has a short shelf life – they insist on spreading it continually. So I use this XCP squirty stuff. It's a doddle to apply – you really do just spray it on – and leaves an invisible clear film that provides as-good-as-it-gets corrosion resistance. Lets you get out on your bike while the tarmac still has a white coating with complete peace of mind.

Mike Armitage

xcp-protection.com

EXPERTS IN THIS ISSUE

Paul Lang
Fussy chap

Excitedly tells us what living with a Chinese big 'un is really like.

Paul Manners
Blackbird guru

Gushes about why you really do need a large, fast Honda.

Ricardo Fincher
Adventurist

Delivers the verdict on pukka kit for genuine expeditions.

Leanna Moore
Instructor

Explains the best way to make the step to your first big bike.

Mike Armitage
Editorist

Extols the overlooked pleasures and rewards of a potter.

Mark Graham
Oddities editor

Good at spotting a groundbreaker. And this month's is mega.

[The Verdict]

'Unexpected smugness'

A few months with the **CFMoto 800NK Advanced** and Paul Lang has gone from mildly cautious to utterly convinced

Unfamiliar looks. That's going to change

As an unknown quantity, I wasn't sure what to expect of the CFMoto. As a low-price, Chinese-made version of a KTM, it might be a little… you know… less than premium, perhaps. Yet after a few months I've developed a feeling of sheer smugness. This cat has had the cream with every ride. Here's why…

» **Exclusivity:** 'Ere mate, what the hell is that?' booms another rider at a petrol station. This isn't the first time the styling and unfamiliar badge have brought out inquisitiveness. After many miles I've never seen another – and I love that. Design-wise, it's a cocktail of inspirations for the crayon wielder at Kiska Design (who do KTM shapes and colours). Hints of Honda, KTM, Ducati and MV are all present, yet the 800 still has its own unique look. I'm a fan.

» **It's a bit of a sleeper:** Sunday blasts are just that. The 94bhp parallel twin loves to be revved and the KYB suspension is great. It holds its own and then some – I can't help but smile as sportsbike riders double-take at the unknown bike they can't shake off.

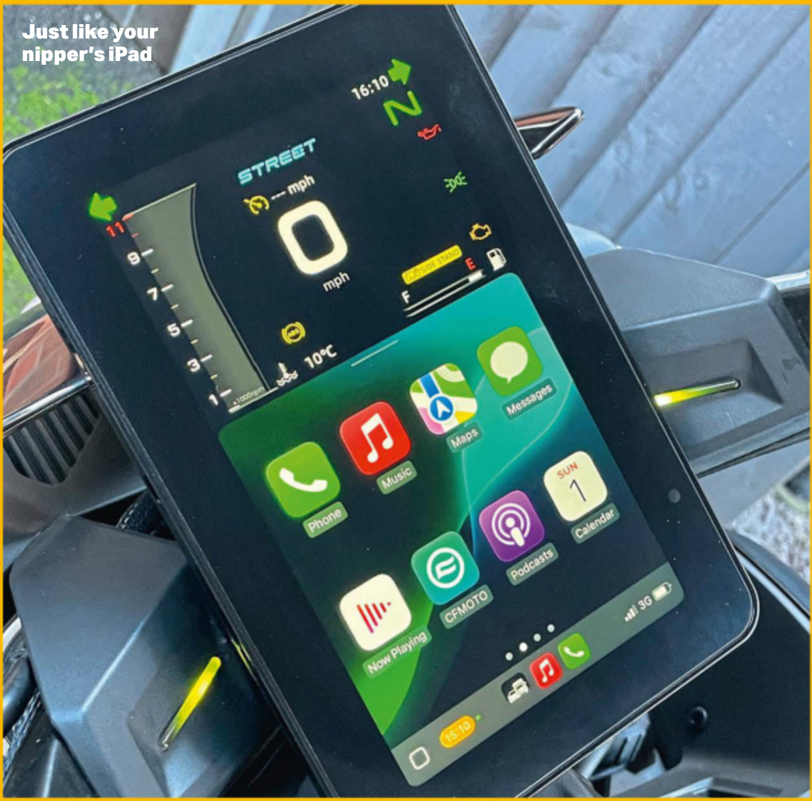
» **Elon Musk approved:** It has a quickshifter, keyless ignition, cruise, Apple CarPlay connection and an 8in touchscreen display. Getting to grips with all the tech was daunting, but now every other bike I ride feels so inadequate. Can't make calls? Need a separate satnav? Can't listen to Spotify? You may think you don't need all this but my biking life has been made easier, less stressful and more enjoyable.

» **Savings-friendly:** CFMoto quote £7499 for the Advanced, which feels excellent value. But online I've found a zero-mile UK model for £5999 with 48-month warranty. Even your bank balance will be smug.

» **I've made it my own:** A small strip light either side of the dash can flash according to the thing you want to be alerted to. Indicators left on, for example. Or fuel reserve met, or something for the cruise, gears or even acceleration. And you can even select the colour for each. Gimmick? Maybe… but I've found it genuinely useful.

There are a few niggles. The standard tyres aren't great. We fitted Bridgestone's new Battlax S23s – they transformed my confidence. It's annoyingly easy to accidentally flick on high beam with your forefinger, and pillions will hate the slippery joke of a seat and lack of grab handles. Bungee points are non-existent. The ignition is keyless but you need the key to open the fuel flap, and the rear mudguard makes no attempt at stopping you getting plastered in filth.

It's not a big list, and they're the sort of things I grumble about with any bike. And they're definitely not enough to stop me being so enthused about the CFMoto. It's a great thing. *PL*


Just like your nipper's iPad

'You've forgotten the winkers, fool'

On a pointless mission (see last issue)...

Standing up well to a salty winter

Obligatory Langy jet wash shot

FACTS AND FIGURES

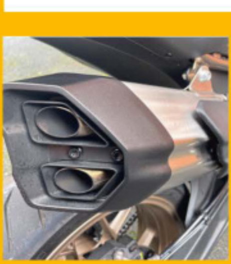
Wet weight
186kg

Top speed
136mph

Fuel figures
50 MPG AVERAGE
Tank size: 15 litres
Distance to fuel light: 150 miles
Range: 180 miles

Price £7499 **Engine** 799cc 8v DOHC parallel twin **Power** 95bhp @ 9300rpm (tested) **Torque** 59 lb.ft @ 6400rpm (tested) **Rake/trail** 24°/96.5mm **Wheelbase** 1468mm **Seat height** 795mm **Colours** black, white **Availability** now

MY FAVOURITE BITS



» THE NOISE The 800's standard exhaust lets out a lovely twin-cylinder boom. Coupled with the pops and bangs you get from using the quickshifter it's quite the mechanical concerto.

» THE LOOKS Lifting the garage door is always a pleasure. Some may find the CFMoto's looks a little bit overboard but I really like its unique style – it has loads of neat bits.

» THE ENGINE Tweaked KTM 790 Duke lump is quite simply a cracker. It's friendly on the commute, thrills on B-road thrashes and is smooth and polite on long motorway slogs. Great motor.

THE LAST WORD

» It's time to stop turning up our noses and welcome Chinese bikes with open arms. Just like the Japanese did in the 1970s, they're going to change the way you think about your next motorcycle – or they are if the excellent 800NK is any sort of marker. I wouldn't hesitate in buying a CFMoto – its details are well thought out, the build quality seems superb, the dealer network is growing daily, warranties are large. Best of all, it's great to ride and inspiring to have in the garage. Highly recommended. Bike

[Knowledge]

New bikes

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N
ROAD
0
DTC 5
DWC 3
EBC 2
ABS 3
DUCATI

Enjoy fiddling? There's plenty to fiddle

Not a B-road, but should be better on one

Ducati Panigale V2 S

Hang on… a new Ducati that makes *less* power than the old one? Yes – and it's a flippin' corker

What's new? Pretty much everything apart from the name on the fairing. The Panigale V2 S has the firm's new 890cc, 118bhp V-twin, with a fresh aluminium monocoque 'frame', double-sided swingarm, and all the expected electrowizardry. Ducati reckon the engine is aimed more at the street than the track, and it's got higher 'bars and more legroom than the outgoing Panigale. It costs £17,167 on the road.

***Bike's* opinion** It might have 35bhp less than the old bike, but the new V2 doesn't leave you wanting. The motor spins up eagerly and offers oodles of acceleration – the new bike is 17kg lighter than the previous model, and with the TC turned off it tries to wheelie in the first three gears. Light, agile and easier to ride than previous Ducati sportsbikes, it's also reassuringly stable while having an unquenchable lust for corner speed, nailing apexes with utter precision. It's every inch a 'proper' Ducati in how it goes, handles and stops, but one that doesn't try to rip your face off. We've only ridden it on track, where it's as fast as the more powerful bike it replaces thanks to low weight and usability – but expect it to be a breath of fresh air on the road. Quite the thing.

Must be fast: look at the brake scoops

CFMoto 675SR-R

Supersport thrills for £6699? Get ready to buy Chinese

What's new? Freshly designed 675cc triple in a light, agile sportsbike chassis. Full suite of rider aids, a 5in colour TFT, USB sockets, tyre pressure monitors… fancy-looking top yoke and fully adjustable KYB suspension… and four grand less than a CBR600RR or ZX-6R. And it's ten grand cheaper than its nearest spec-for-spec rival, MV's F3 R. Gulp.

***Bike's* opinion** Rev limiter cuts in too abruptly at 11,000rpm redline, long footpeg blobs limit outright track potential. Everything else is ace. The 88bhp motor is easy to use and sounds top. Front-end feel is fabulous. Build quality seems good, and it has a four-year warranty. It's well-sorted… and so cheap. Tempted?

Place of origin is unmistakeable

Indian Chieftain PowerPlus Limited

Ridiculous name; serious mile-swallowing US bagger

What's new? Indian's trad' bagger (not to be confused with a top box-shod tourer) gets a new 1834cc V-twin, chassis tweaks and even more high-tech clutter. Yours for £27,595.

***Bike's* opinion** Indian have always been good at building traditional-looking, charismatic bikes with modern tech and usability. 127bhp may not sound much from 1834cc, but it has a thumping great 134 lb.ft of torque and revs happily. The chassis hides its 382kg well, and it out-specs its direct rival, the similarly priced H-D Street Glide. Want to do the Route 66 thing without going Harley? It's impressive.

Keep that front wheel down and it'll run forever

[Why I love my…]

Honda Blackbirds

Yes, plural. **Paul Manners** has three, and has restored 17…

Blackbirds are remarkable value for money, very well engineered (I'm an engineer by trade), very stable, quiet, and handle well if you fit the right tyres (I like Mitas Touring Forces). I've rebuilt 17 – I buy them in different states of disrepair and then work on them until they're right. I love them.

I modify mine with VFR 'bars and seat, because the standard seat is too narrow and gets uncomfortable after about 40 minutes. Now I can be in the saddle for six hours with no bum-ache at all. Also, if you don't thrash it you can get 300 miles out of a brimmed tank.

> 'Remarkable value for money'

The engines are pretty bulletproof unless you wheelie them – it has a wet sump, so it will pick up air and can seize. But if you look after the motor it'll go on and on. I've heard of a Swiss guy who went 500,000km (312,000 miles) on one engine.

The things that go wrong usually stem from bikes being out in the weather. You can't see the corrosion as everything is under plastic, so it just rots. The damp also causes electrical issues as contacts corrode.

The cam chain tensioner can go, but it's usually because owners use the wrong oil. The bike was designed for semi-synthetic, and if you put fully synthetic in it's actually too slippy, so the lock mechanism on the tensioner can't lock, so it fails. It happens repeatedly if you use synthetic oil, but if you use semi-synthetic it will last 100,000 miles.

The stock rear suspension is over-stiff and over-damped, so I replace it. The forks are soft but over-damped, so I use stiffer springs with 2.5-weight oil. You can spend a lot of money on suspension, but it can easily cost more than the bike is worth.

In terms of fun per pound, there's not much that gets close. I can't fault it. If I find something good, I stick with it, so I'll probably stick with the Blackbird until I can't move it around.

» Thanks to the Honda Blackbird group on Facebook, which Paul runs.

Buying tips

» What to look for Check electrics as the contacts corrode. Reg/recs can fail as well. Rattles from the inline-four engine indicate a kippered cam chain tensioner. You're looking at an older bike, so make sure the suspension is not past its best and all baggy.

» What to pay from £1600 (private)

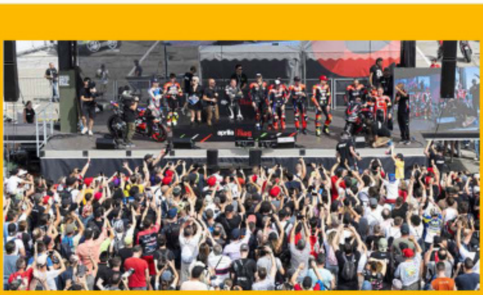
» Insurance go to mcncompare.com

MCN COMPARE

[Knowledge]
Listings

This isn't a limp brochure-style round-up of all the bikes you can buy. No, your guide is far more useful as it **only contains bikes that we have tested**, with comparable on-the-road prices plus data, expert opinion and must-know detail gathered by fussy full-time testers. We do hundreds of thousands of miles, dyno, datalog, weigh and answer the big questions. Don't buy a new bike without reading this first.

BIKE	PRICE	ENGINE	TOP SPEED	POWER	MPG	BIKE VERDICT	RATING	TESTED
APRILIA uk.aprilia.com, 00800 15565500 *Bike's* choice: Tuono Factory defines the supernaked class… but we'd buy an RS660								
RSV4 Factory	**£23,150**	**1099cc V4**	**186mph***	**214bhp****	**45mpg**	Ace engine, great suspension and electronics, exemplary steering. Also tiny, and depreciates.	**9/10**	**Jul '21**
Tuono V4 Factory	**£18,250**	**1077cc V4**	**165mph**	**159bhp**	**35mpg**	Superb motor, crisp chassis, exotic-yet-friendly. Cool. Non-Factory model is every-day usable.	**10/10**	**Jul '24**
Tuareg 660	**£10,750**	**659cc twin**	**120mph***	**79bhp****	**59mpg****	Ténéré rival is less rounded but has more tech and better suspension. Rugged, fun, but a bit raw.	**8/10**	**Oct '22**
RS660	**£10,450**	**659cc twin**	**139mph**	**91bhp**	**45mpg**	Sportsbike handling, punch and tech; sports-tourer comfort and usability. Impressive thing.	**10/10**	**Dec '24**
Tuono 660	**£9,850**	**659cc twin**	**135mph***	**90bhp***	**50mpg**	Comfier and more agile than RS660, more fun than a Street Triple. Fancier Factory version £10k.	**9/10**	**Jun '21**
BENELLI benelli.com, 0844 4128450 *Bike's* choice: not ridden it yet, but the Leoncino 800 Trail looks tidy…								
752 S	**£6,171**	**754cc twin**	**95mph***	**75bhp ****	**55mpg**	Designed in Italy, built in China. Looks a bit disjointed but rides well – not MT-07 league, but good.	**7/10**	**Jul '20**
TRK 502	**£4,938**	**500cc twin**	**95mph***	**46bhp****	**72mpg****	Lacks a little balance and refinement, but good value distance tool. Italy's best-selling big bike.	**6/10**	**Mar '18**
BIMOTA bimotauk.co.uk, 01603 920240 *Bike's* choice: radical, extreme, whacky, beautiful… who wouldn't want a Tesi?								
Tesi H2	**£59,000**	**998cc V4**	**190mph***	**237bhp****	**28mpg**	Epic supercharged motor in delicious hub-steered chassis. Exquisite, wild, thirsty, expensive.	**8/10**	**Sep '21**
BMW bmw-motorrad.co.uk, 0800 777155 *Bike's* choice: yeah, it's predictable… but brilliance of the GS can't be ignored								
R18 Classic	**£19,540**	**1802cc flat twin**	**115mph***	**91bhp****	**51mpg**	Ace boxer cruiser spoilt a tad by its slightly Harley-ish screen and bags, but still a tidy device.	**8/10**	**May '21**
R18	**£17,480**	**1802cc flat twin**	**113mph**	**87bhp**	**50mpg**	Top mix of modernity, quality and tradition. Roctane model (£22k) has less bling, more handling.	**9/10**	**Jul '21**
K1600GT	**£21,100**	**1649cc inline 6**	**154mph****	**158bhp****	**48mpg****	Magical motor, amazing agility, self-levelling suspension, all the toys… It's a sporty-super-tourer.	**9/10**	**Jul '22**
R1300GS TE	**£18,465**	**1300cc flat twin**	**135mph****	**138bhp**	**49mpg**	Less weight, more oomph, fancy toys – it's the best big GS yet. But the Ducati Multi' V4 is slicker…	**9/10**	**Jul '24**
R1250RT	**£17,350**	**1254cc flat twin**	**142mph**	**117bhp**	**50mpg**	Go-to tourer isn't to all tastes but you can't argue that the variable-valve radar-shod twin is top.	**9/10**	**Dec '21**
R1250RS SE	**£15,410**	**1254cc flat twin**	**139mph**	**127bhp**	**50mpg**	Fast, comfy, accomplished, lots of tech – sports-tourers aren't dead. Not perfect, but it's close.	**9/10**	**May '20**
R1250R	**£12,330**	**1254cc flat twin**	**150mph***	**134bhp****	**60mpg****	Ace variable-valve motor in friendly, comfy, capable chassis. Better pure road bike than a GS?	**9/10**	**Aug '19**
R12 nineT	**£14,420**	**1170cc flat twin**	**140mph***	**108bhp****	**55mpg****	High-quality retro with thumping twin, solid handling, top details, and more tech than ever. Ace.	**9/10**	**May '24**
M1000RR	**£36,040**	**999cc inline 4**	**195mph***	**209bhp***	**36mpg***	Wild homologation exotica with stupid power and wings – yet you can ride it to work. Mind-blowing.	**9/10**	**Dec '23**
M1000XR	**£22,580**	**999cc inline 4**	**173mph**	**190bhp**	**42mpg**	Adventure meets WSB. Epic... but a bit vibey and no luggage options. Not sure why you'd want it.	**7/10**	**Oct '24**
S1000RR Sport	**£18,610**	**999cc inline 4**	**190mph***	**207bhp****	**44mpg****	Amazing mix of insane performance and usability, but latest one not quite as friendly as it used to be.	**9/10**	**Feb '25**
S1000XR TE	**£18,340**	**999cc inline 4**	**155mph**	**161bhp**	**43mpg**	High-rise sportsbike. Fast, agile, well equipped. Also got an odd seat. Very good, but not perfect.	**8/10**	**May '25**
S1000R Sport	**£15,315**	**999cc inline 4**	**167mph**	**163bhp**	**48mpg**	Not shouty, but epic: agility, ride, engine and spec are superb. M1000R (£19,480) not worth extra.	**10/10**	**Aug '22**
F900XR	**£10,350**	**895cc twin**	**130mph***	**100bhp**	**50mpg**	Easy-to-ride Tracer rival with eager twin, quality chassis, fine spec. Very good. Naked R is 'meh'.	**8/10**	**Feb '24**
F900GS	**£11,995**	**895cc twin**	**130mph***	**103bhp****	**60mpg****	Better on road and trail than previous 850. Not full of character, but the best GS for greenlaning.	**8/10**	**May '24**
F750GS	**£8,995**	**853cc twin**	**110mph***	**76bhp**	**69mpg****	Slim front tyre and 19in wheel make this detuned 850 a better road bike. But lacks some 'wow'.	**7/10**	**May '18**
G310GS	**£5,890**	**313cc single**	**88mph****	**34bhp****	**84mpg****	Decent quality, easy to ride, but missing a defining GS character. Not peanuts, but good.	**7/10**	**Mar '18**
BSA bsacompany.co.uk *Bike's* choice: there's only one model so far, good job it's quite compelling…								
Gold Star	**£5,171**	**652cc single**	**105mph***	**43bhp**	**58mpg**	A2-legal retro with '50s style, decent quality and iconic badge. For laid-back Sunday pootles.	**8/10**	**Apr '23**
CCM ccm-motorcycles.com, 01204 544930 *Bike's* choice: of the various Spitfire variants the flat-tracker models look coolest								
Spitfire Bobber	**£12,767**	**600cc single**	**100mph***	**55bhp****	**56mpg**	Curious mix of laid-back bobber styling with stiff chassis and revvy power. Not mega, but good.	**8/10**	**Jan '20**
Street Moto	**£9995**	**600cc single**	**100mph***	**55bhp****	**55mpg***	Punchy, simple, light back-lane tool. Fun, not practical. R (11,495) has light wheels, posh shock.	**8/10**	**Dec '24**
CFMOTO cfmoto.co.uk *Bike's* choice: Chinese bikes come of age – 450MT is a seriously good A2 adventurist								
800NK Sport	**£6,171**	**799cc twin**	**130mph***	**94bhp****	**45mpg***	Basically it's KTM 790 Duke with a few different parts and fresh looks. It's good and it's cheap.	**8/10**	**Nov '23**
700CL-X Heritage	**£5,171**	**693cc twin**	**117mph**	**64bhp****	**55mpg**	Chirpy, fun, usable, good spec, long warranty. It's good… but no longer cheap next to finer rivals.	**7/10**	**Mar '23**
450MT	**£5,699**	**449cc twin**	**112mph***	**46bhp****	**65mpg***	As good as a Ténéré on trails, extremely robust, good spec, keen price. Why buy anything else?	**9/10**	**Mar '25**
450SR S	**£5,699**	**449cc twin**	**115mph***	**46bhp****	**65mpg**	Eager yet smooth motor, agile handling, single-sider, TFT... it's as sporty as A2 gets. Impressive.	**9/10**	**Oct '24**
DUCATI ducatiuk.com, 0845 718500 *Bike's* choice: effective, fun and funky, the DesertX is so damn desirable								
Multistrada V4 Rally	**£24,367**	**1158cc V4**	**155mph***	**170bhp****	**43mpg****	Most sophisticated, rounded, clever Ducati ever. Staggeringly complete. Pricey, yes. Also epic.	**10/10**	**Mar '25**
Diavel V4	**£24,167**	**1158cc V4**	**150mph***	**166bhp****	**44mpg****	Caricature looks, raked stance, wild power, silly tail lights. And amazing. Not for everyone, mind.	**8/10**	**Apr '23**
Panigale V4 S	**£27,651**	**1103cc V4**	**191mph**	**203bhp**	**39mpg**	Stupid-fast, sharp, needs working to get the best out, but still feels mega to 'normal' folk. Wow.	**9/10**	**Apr '25**
Streetfighter V4 S	**£23,661**	**1103cc V4**	**169mph**	**181bhp**	**34mpg**	Fast, sexy, loud, desirable… but constantly a full-on experience. SP2 version (£32k) even sillier.	**8/10**	**Jul '24**
Scrambler 1100 Pro	**£12,051**	**1079cc V-twin**	**110mph***	**83bhp****	**45mpg***	1100 Evo-engined, easy-riding Scrambler has charming twin and more comfort than 800s.	**8/10**	**Nov '22**
Streetfighter V2	**£16,151**	**955cc V-twin**	**160mph***	**151bhp****	**45mpg***	Stripped-down Pani' V2 makes more sense than its wild V4 sibling. Still stiff and sporty, mind.	**8/10**	**Aug '22**
Panigale V4 R	**£39,151**	**998cc V4**	**195mph***	**215bhp****	**35mpg****	Screaming, sharp, ballistic homologation tool. Amazing. But cheaper S is as good for most of us.	**8/10**	**Nov '23**
DesertX	**£17,467**	**937cc V-twin**	**130mph***	**110bhp****	**41mpg**	Sexy dual-purpose tool perfectly balances road and off-road needs. Our 2022 Bike of the Year.	**10/10**	**Oct '22**
SuperSport 950	**£16,367**	**937cc V-twin**	**145mph***	**113bhp****	**43mpg**	Not super fast or whizzpop, but a top, usable, sporty (and overlooked) road bike for normal folk.	**9/10**	**Jan '18**
Monster	**£11,767**	**937cc V-twin**	**135mph***	**110bhp****	**45mpg***	Light, fun, usable, quality roadster with badge appeal. Mega. SP (£14k) sharper but less usable.	**10/10**	**Feb '22**
Panigale V2 S	**£17,167**	**890cc V-twin**	**150mph***	**118bhp****	**53mpg****	Lighter, friendlier and less 'grr' than any previous Ducati sportsbike, but still slick and fast. Ace.	**9/10**	**May '25**
Multistrada V2 S	**£16,562**	**890cc V-twin**	**145mph***	**114bhp****	**47mpg**	Refined like no Ducati twin before. Also comfy, swift, high-tech and top quality. Pricey but mega.	**9/10**	**Apr '25**
Scrambler Icon	**£10,367**	**803cc V-twin**	**123mph**	**72bhp***	**47mpg**	Image and quality matched by much-improved dynamic. Easy in town, great on back roads.	**8/10**	**Jan '24**
Hyper' 698 Mono	**£12,367**	**659cc single**	**123mph**	**76bhp****	**59mpg**	Fruitiest single ever is light, responsive, engaging. But it craves twisty roads and a skilled rider.	**8/10**	**Oct '24**



Wallet-free wonder

» Happen to have Sunday 1 June free on the calendar? How about a trundle to Misano for the Aprilia All Stars bash? World champ Jorge Martin and the rest of Aprilia's MotoGP squad will be there, and dicing on track on road bikes. There'll be an off-road area, test rides, a racing museum and more. That Max Biaggi will be there is no surprise, but the fact it's free to get in genuinely is. How wonderfully refreshing.

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** *Claimed* * *Estimated*

BIKE	PRICE	ENGINE	TOP SPEED	POWER	MPG	BIKE VERDICT	RATING	TESTED
FANTIC fanticmotoruk.com *Bike's* choice: there are three versions of the Cabellero, but just go for the best colour (so that's the Scrambler)								
Caballero 700	£9,671	689cc twin	115mph*	74bhp**	46mpg*	Retro scrambler built around Yam's great MT-07 motor. Good, has its moments… but not ace.	7/10	Jan '24
Caballero 500	£6,121	449cc single	100mph*	43bhp**	60mpg	Rev-happy, ex-enduro single in a light, good-quality package. Frantic on long rides, but top fun.	8/10	Oct '19
HARLEY-DAVIDSON harley-davidson.com, 0871 6412508 *Bike's* choice: the Fat Bob has looks, finish, good ride… and funny name								
CVO Street Glide	£40,495	1977cc V-twin	120mph*	120bhp*	50mpg	Best ever H-D tourer. Refined, classy, with huge grunt and nimbleness. Unique experience.	9/10	Jan '24
Low Rider S	£19,795	1868cc V-twin	115mph	93bhp*	50mpg**	Top looks and noise, more fun to ride than you think. But better in California than Croydon.	6/10	Jan '20
CVO Road Glide	£40,495	1923cc V-twin	105mph*	105bhp**	43mpg**	The defining H-D full-dress tourer with extra bling. Luxurious, surprising, expensive… unique.	8/10	Sep '23
Street Glide Special	£27,495	1745cc V-twin	115mph*	40bhp*	45mpg*	Classic looks, decent suspension, good finish and latest 8v motor is the best yet. Fine thing.	8/10	Dec '16
Breakout	£25,195	1745cc V-twin	115mph*	75bhp*	50mpg**	Low-slung, drag-inspired cruiser that rides better than expected. Classy, refined hot-rod.	8/10	Dec '17
Street Bob	£14,995	1745cc V-twin	110mph*	75bhp*	50mpg**	Classic chopper-ish lines, clean handling, modern 8v power. But Fat Bob is far better.	6/10	Dec '17
Low Rider ST	£21,295	1923cc V-twin	115mph*	106bhp	40mpg*	Stonking motor, surprising handling, bold style, lovely finish. Odd riding position, otherwise fab.	8/10	Jul '22
Pan America Special	£17,295	1252cc V-twin	135mph**	148bhp**	43mpg	Comfy, composed, brisk, lots of equipment. Very good, but not quite a GS or Multistrada rival.	8/10	Sep '21
Sportster S	£15,145	1252cc V-twin	120mph*	119bhp**	50mpg	Fastest, smoothest, best handling, most techy Harley cruiser ever. Ace… but lacks the H-D feel.	8/10	Nov '21
Nightster Special	£14,495	975cc V-twin	120mph*	89bhp**	52mpg**	Smallest engine in H-D's range. Decent looks, modern ride, but lacks Harley soul. A bit... odd.	6/10	Aug '22
HONDA honda.co.uk/motorcycles, 0845 2008000 *Bike's* choice: Hornet's good, Blade's epic… but have you ridden an NT1100? Great tool								
GL1800 Gold Wing Tour	£25,649	1833cc flat-six	112mph	125bhp**	51mpg	Huge, OTT, but smart suspension, toys and utter refinement mean it's still the grand-tour king.	8/10	Dec '22
CBR1000RR-R Blade SP	£23,499	1000cc inline 4	185mph*	215bhp**	42mpg**	Revvy, focused, full of HRC-ness. But also refined, classy, and more usable than you think.	9/10	Feb '25
Africa Twin Adv' Sport	£17,649	1084cc twin	130mph*	94bhp	44mpg	All the tech, plush optional semi-active, classy feel, huge range. And daft switchgear. Hey-ho.	9/10	Nov '24
Africa Twin	£13,049	1084cc twin	130mph*	94bhp	47mpg	Feels like a big, refined enduro bike, so is different to a GS. Cheaper too. Daft switches and dash.	8/10	Jul '24
NT1100	£14,099	1084cc twin	123mph	97bhp	52mpg	Cross between Africa Twin and Deauville. Not exciting, but high-spec, plush, quietly-ace tourer.	9/10	May '25
CMX1100 Rebel	£6,135	1084cc twin	125mph*	86bhp**	52mpg	Africa Twin motor in cheery, usable, well-made cruiser. Not plush, but fun and very affordable.	8/10	Jan '22
CB1000 Hornet SP	£9,999	1000cc inline 4	150mph*	155bhp	48mpg**	Powerful, fine spec, classy ride, and top fun. Ace. Makes all other supernakeds look expensive.	9/10	Mar '23
XL750 Transalp	£9,999	755cc twin	135mph*	91bhp*	58mpg	Smooth, easy to ride, great ergonomics, and cool colours. But revvy twin doesn't suit the bike.	8/10	Aug '23
CB750 Hornet	£6,999	755cc twin	140mph*	91bhp**	65mpg**	Simple, honest, fun, great spec, class-leading power – and affordable too. But GSX-8S is nicer...	9/10	Jul '23
X-ADV	£11,249	745cc twin	105mph*	54bhp**	70mpg*	Off-road scooter you'll never take off-road. Pricey too. But also practical, enjoyable and top fun.	8/10	Mar '25
Forza 750	£9,999	745cc twin	110mph*	54bhp**	70mpg	Capable bike with looks and practicality of a scooter. And DCT. Odd concept, ace execution.	9/10	May '21
NC750X	£7,849	745cc twin	115mph*	58bhp**	70mpg	Flexible twin, big mpg, agile, clever storage. Not flash, but very useful. DCT (£830) is worth it.	10/10	Nov '21
CBR650R E-Clutch	£9,899	649cc inline 4	138mph	86bhp	54mpg	Flexible, handsome, fun, fast-enough road sportsbike. Smart auto clutch is genuinely useful.	8/10	Aug '24
CB650R	£9,399	649cc inline 4	140mph	93bhp**	50mpg	Naked version of CBR (above) is fabulously balanced. Quality, dynamic, value all superb.	9/10	May '19
CBR600RR	£10,529	599cc inline 4	170mph*	119bhp**	52mpg**	Shrieking power, epic agility, pinpoint steering, top quality. Tiny and demanding, yes. But mega.	9/10	Oct '24
GB350S	£3,949	348cc single	85mph*	21bhp**	70mpg**	Charming retro with old-school Honda quality. Not fast or showy, but plush, classy – and cheap.	9/10	May '25
CRF300L	£5,829	286cc single	80mph*	27bhp**	70mpg*	Fit green-laner, easy commuter, bit quicker than old 250. Rally (£6499) has big tank and screen.	7/10	Aug '22
Super Cub	£3,869	125cc single	65mph*	9.2bhp	124mpg	Descendent of iconic step-thru' is charming. Ownership by urban folk should be compulsory.	8/10	Jul '19
HUSQVARNA husqvarnamotorcycles.com/gb *Bike's* choice: Supermoto is desirable, funky, silly… and yet usable day-to-day								
Norden 901	£12,699	889cc twin	130mph*	103bhp**	63mpg**	Attractive reworking of KTM 890 Adventure. Capable, nicely made, but lacks a 'wow' moment.	7/10	Oct '22
Svartpilen 801	£10,499	799cc twin	130mph*	104bhp**	50mpg*	KTM 790 Duke motor in a classier, calmer chassis. Not cheap, but refined, good spec, nice feel.	8/10	Oct '24
701 Supermoto	£10,399	693cc single	121mph	71bhp	54mpg	Engaging, fun at sensible speed, frugal, sexy, friendlier than it looks. Proper middleweight tool.	9/10	Sep '17
701 Enduro	£12,299	693cc single	120mph*	71bhp	54mpg	Proper dirt bike, yet refined, frugal and plush on the road. Big-tank LR (long range) version, too.	9/10	Apr '19
Svartpilen 401	£5,599	375cc single	105mph*	43bhp**	65mpg*	Built for A2 riders avoiding the mainstream. Essentially KTM's fine 390 Duke with more style.	7/10	Jul '18
INDIAN indianmotorcycle.co.uk *Bike's* choice: classic character, modern quality, unique feel – Scout is a standout cruiser								
Chief Dark Horse	£15,195	1890cc V-twin	120mph*	89bhp*	60mpg	Big twin has stripped-back cool, walloping drive, surprising agility. Engaging trad' cruiser.	8/10	Feb '24
Chieftain PowerPlus	£27,595	1834cc V-twin	125mph*	127bhp**	40mpg*	Huge bagger with hugely grunty (134 lb.ft) and refined motor, full bling and tech. Even handles.	9/10	May '25
Challenger	£21,766	1770cc V-twin	112mph**	122bhp*	46mpg*	Full-on tourer with ace water-cooled motor, physics-defying chassis, full tech. Watch out, H-D.	8/10	Jan '20
101 Scout	£16,095	1250cc V-twin	120mph	110bhp	40mpg*	Impressive mix of trad' cruiser flair and sporty (ish) credentials. Engaging, amusing, classy.	8/10	Aug '24
FTR1200R Carbon	£16,695	1203cc V-twin	140mph*	123bhp**	38mpg	Stylish, high-quality, sporty retro with ace V-twin. We preferred it with the old 19in wheel, mind.	8/10	Nov '22
KAWASAKI kawasaki.co.uk, 01628 856750 *Bike's* choice: has to be the Ninja Z H2. Friendly, usable, yet suitably deranged								
Versys 1000 SE GT	£17,468	1043cc inline 4	144mph	118bhp**	42mpg	Top-spec Versys with all the toys, luxurious ride, luggage… Ace two-up tourer, but expensive.	7/10	Feb '24
Versys 1100 SE GT	£17,349	1099cc inline 4	144mph	119bhp	40mpg	Gutsy, high-rise, high-spec 'adventure tourer'. Ace pillion bike. Lacks wow factor, but a class act.	8/10	Apr '25
Ninja 1100SX	£14,999	1099cc inline 4	149mph	124bhp	41mpg	UK's fave sports tourer is smooth, refined, well equipped. Bit dated? Who cares – it's still great.	9/10	Apr '25
Ninja H2 SX SE	£25,815	998cc inline 4	186mph*	197bhp**	39mpg	Sports-touring exotica. Not perfect, but classy, usable, and that motor… Base H2 SX is £21,735.	8/10	Jun '19
Z H2 SE	£17,667	998cc inline 4	175mph*	197bhp**	34mpg	The impressive Z H2 (below) with fine semi-active ride. It's the thinking rider's supernaked.	9/10	Jul '21
Z H2	£17,465	998cc inline 4	175mph*	197bhp**	34mpg	Mega blown H2 motor in bespoke naked chassis. Far more road focus than supernaked rivals.	8/10	Oct '20
Ninja ZX-10RR	£25,971	998cc inline 4	180mph	189bhp	44mpg	The already-capable ZX-10R with tuned motor and fancy wheels: basically a base for racing.	9/10	Jun '18
Z900RS	£11,522	948cc inline 4	143mph	102bhp	51mpg	Z900 in retro clobber. And better for it – dynamic, feel and detail are great. SE (£13k) even better.	8/10	Nov '22

Question no one asked

Chinese movers and shakers CFMoto have a three-cylinder sportsbike called the 675SR-R – and it's flippin' good (see page 93). They've also developed a four-cylinder model called the 750SR-R, which is likely to arrive here soon… and which features a seat belt. Patent documents show an inertia reel-type system in the seat unit that tethers the rider to the perch. It's unclear if it's the same as this Kangol system from 1967.

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BIKE	PRICE	ENGINE	TOP SPEED	POWER	MPG	BIKE VERDICT	RATING	TESTED
Z900	£9,371	948cc inline 4	145mph*	123bhp**	52mpg**	If you grew up on inline fours, this is ace. Not as punchy as MT-09, but very good and well priced.	7/10	Apr '25
Z650RS	£8,115	649cc twin	130mph*	67bhp**	65mpg**	Spot-on mix of modern Z650's abilities with cool '70s retro vibe. £150 extra for green? Worth it.	8/10	Jan '22
Versys 650	£7,422	649cc twin	115mph*	62bhp*	54mpg*	Twin-cylinder all-rounder is knocking on, but latest extras keep it valid. Fine multi-purpose tool.	8/10	Aug '22
Vulcan S	£7,615	649cc twin	115mph*	61bhp**	63mpg*	Affordable, good-looking, modern cruiser with ER-6 power. Surprising ability, keen price.	8/10	Jan '22
Ninja 650	£6,967	649cc twin	130mph*	67bhp**	70mpg*	Z650 dressed up in ZX-10R costume. Comfy, easy-to-ride, cheery twin for J. Rea wannabes.	9/10	May '17
Z650	£7,665	649cc twin	130mph*	67bhp*	70mpg*	Zed is fun, fit, frugal. Nice, but lacks sparkle next to a Hornet, MT-07 or Trident. It's knocking on…	7/10	May '23
Ninja 7 HEV	£11,949	451cc twin	115mph*	58bhp**	85mpg	World's first hybrid. Frugal,smooth, effortless on elec power. But also heavy, steady and pricey.	7/10	Jan '24
ZX-4RR	£8,699	399cc four	130mph*	76bhp**	50mph*	Not A2, but a single-minded screaming race-rep. Small, demanding but also fabulous fun.	8/10	Apr '24
KOVE kovemotouk.com *Bike's* choice: surprising 800X rivals the Ténéré as a real dual-purpose tool. Fine thing								
800X Pro	£8,499	799cc twin	130mph*	81bhp	51mpg	KTM 790-based motor, great chassis, fine spec. Not perfect, but ruddy close – it's superb value.	9/10	Oct '24
510X	£5,999	498cc twin	110mph*	47bhp**	60mpg*	Impressive spec, decent performance, big tank, attractive price. Credible A2 adventure bike.	8/10	Nov '24
KTM ktm.co.uk *Bike's* choice: practical, verging on sensible, but also very silly. It's the 890 SMT for us, please								
Super Adventure R	£18,199	1301cc V-twin	155mph*	158bhp**	44mpg	Like a rocket-powered 'crosser with cruise, Bluetooth and comfort. Mega… but Multi' V4 better.	9/10	Nov '23
1290 Super Duke GT	£16,803	1301cc V-twin	159mph	158bhp	45mpg	Mad power, sports handling, all the toys and eats miles. Couple of iffy bits, otherwise ace.	9/10	Jan '19
1390 Super Duke R Evo	£17,622	1350cc V-twin	165mph	178bhp	42mpg	Mighty fast yet friendly, sharp but safe, and loads of gizmos. Surprisingly usable supernaked.	9/10	Mar '23
990 Duke	£10,246	947cc twin	145mph*	121bhp**	60mpg**	More mature and finer quality than earlier Dukes, but still loopy. KTM's best naked… but pricey.	9/10	Jan '25
890 SMT	£11,434	899cc twin	130mph**	103bhp*	63mpg	Sharper and more engaging than an adventure bike, more practical than a naked. And a bit silly.	8/10	Feb '24
890 Adventure	£11,999	889cc twin	130mph*	103bhp**	63mpg**	The previous 790 with extra bhp, smoother delivery, tweaked chassis, more tech. Very good.	8/10	Jan '21
690 Enduro R	£9,835	690cc single	115mph*	73bhp**	60mpg*	Super-clever Duke/Husky 701 lump in long-legged trailie. Pukka, classy, dual-purpose tool.	8/10	Feb '16
390 Adventure	£6,299	373cc single	105mph*	43bhp**	56mpg	Chirpy A2-legal adventurer looks like a 1290 (sort of). But it's basically a 390 Duke in wellies.	8/10	Jul '20
390 Duke	£5,499	373cc single	108mph	41bhp	70mpg*	Revvy, eager motor in agile 125 chassis? Yes. Looks like the 1290 and less toy-like than it was.	7/10	Jun '17
LANGEN langenmotorcycles.co.uk; 01942 724059 *Bike's* choice: there's one model, which limits choice. Luckily it's amazing								
Two Stroke	£32,580	249cc V-twin	130mph*	74bhp**	40mpg*	Pricey, yes. But stroker is deliciously engineered, fast, raw. We love it… but £33k is a lot for a 250.	8/10	Dec '23
MASH mashmotorcycles.co.uk; 01264 889012 *Bike's* choice: go for the X-Ride (but budget for new tyres and suspension)								
650 X-Ride	£4,699	644cc single	90mph*	40bhp**	60mpg*	Ex-Honda Dominator motor in 70s-style trailie. Good quality, keen price, let down by chassis.	5/10	Apr '21
Five Hundred 400	£4,455	398cc single	80mph*	28bhp**	70mpg**	French brand, made in China, Honda-based motor. Iffy details, odd name, but cheap and fun.	6/10	Dec '17
MOTO GUZZI uk.motoguzzi.it *Bike's* choice: unique image, sweet ride, classy quality; it's not fast or clever but V85 is lovely								
V100 Mandello S	£14,900	1042cc V-twin	135mph*	108bhp	50mpg	Sports-tourer is classy, comfy, capable, charismatic. Serious alternative to a Honda or BMW.	9/10	Sep '23
Stelvio	£13,850	1042cc V-twin	135mph*	113bhp**	50mpg*	Brilliant V100 (above) in capable, classy, convincing adventure guise. Not a GS, but very good.	9/10	Nov '24
V85 TT	£11,400	853cc V-twin	120mph*	79bhp**	50mpg*	Fabulous adventure mix of old-school charm, proper tech, comfort, and a cheerful dynamic.	9/10	May '24
V85 Strada	£10,600	853cc V-twin	120mph*	79bhp*	50mph*	Stripped-back V85 has less tech, fewer fixings, but lighter wheels for sharper handling. Decent.	8/10	May '24
V9 Bobber	£9,750	853cc V-twin	110mph*	64bhp**	55mpg*	Pleasing V-twin in a trendy, well-made package. Doesn't sell well so haggle yourself a top deal.	8/10	Jun '16
V7 Special	£8,000	853cc V-twin	115mph*	64bhp**	63mpg	Style, ride and badge all spot-on. 850 V-twin isn't as grunty as a Street Twin, but we forgive it.	9/10	Jul '21
MOTO MORINI motomorini.eu *Bike's* choice: you might need to be brave, but the Milano is a convincingly authentic Morini								
Milano	£12,700	1187cc V-twin	145mph*	114bhp**	42mpg	Instant chunky power, firm and direct chassis, neat 70s paint. Buying is a gamble, but it's cool.	8/10	Nov '19
X-Cape	£6,999	649cc twin	109mph*	59bhp**	49mpg	Made in China with CFMoto engine. Great spec, good quality, rides well. No Ténéré, but cheap.	7/10	Mar '22
MV Agusta mvagusta.co.uk, 0844 4128450 *Bike's* choice: latest Brutale is refined, usable, yet still exotic								
Enduro Veloce	£20,000	931cc inline 3	149mph**	122bhp**	40mpg*	Fast, accurate, inspiring, surprisingly complete adventurer. But no use on trails. Expensive, too.	7/10	Jan '25
Dragster 800 RR SCS	£18,220	798cc inline 3	150mph*	138bhp*	45mpg	Expensive, yes. But also classy, high-spec, comfy, and refined like no MV before. Impressive.	8/10	Jan '22
Superveloce	£18,980	798cc inline 3	160mph*	146bhp**	41mpg	Super-sporty F3 in semi-retro dress. Fast, sharp, sounds top, looks superb, quite demanding.	8/10	Mar '23
Turismo Veloce Rosso	£13,930	798cc inline 3	136mph	110bhp**	48mpg*	Adventure bike? Nah, it's like a high-rise sportsbike. So-so ride, busy dash, but it's good.	8/10	Jan '19
Brutale 800 RR	£15,590	798cc inline 3	153mph**	138bhp**	40mpg**	Top engine, nimble, great looks, ridiculous hard ride. Semi-auto clutch version a bit gimmicky.	6/10	Apr '19
NORTON nortonmotorcycles.com; 0121 565 4411 *Bike's* choice: Think Norton, think Commando… and it's good to ride, too								
V4SV	£44,000	1200cc V4	180mph*	185bhp**	40mpg*	Not as slick as an M1000RR, expensive. So what? Brit sportsbike is solid, fast, beautiful, unique.	8/10	Dec '23
V4CR	£42,000	1200cc V4	175mph*	185bhp**	40mpg*	Sculpted café racer is modern and old-school at the same time. Pricey but effective exotica.	9/10	Oct '23
Commando 961 SP	£16,999	961cc twin	125mph*	77bhp**	40mpg*	Traditional pushrod Brit twin for the modern world. Sweet handling, well made, lots of character.	9/10	Mar '23
ROYAL ENFIELD royalenfield.com/uk; 0844 412 8450 *Bike's* choice: Himalayan 450 is a superb mix of performance, quality and price								
Bear 650	£6,749	648cc twin	110mph*	47bhp**	60mpg*	Splendid Inter' (below) in Scrambler form. Chunky looks, USD forks, longer suspension. Good.	9/10	Mar '25
Interceptor	£6,599	648cc twin	110mph	44bhp	60mpg	Charming twin has authentic feel, fine looks and attractive price. Think Indian-made Guzzi V7.	9/10	Mar '23
Himalayan 450	£5,850	452cc single	90mph*	40bhp**	78mpg**	Rugged, functional appeal, now with more oomph and improved ride and quality. Great bike.	9/10	Jul '24
Guerrilla 450	£4,850	452cc single	100mph*	39bhp**	83mpg	Roadster version of Himi'. Great engine, otherwise a bit 'meh' – not as 'right' as a Speed 400.	7/10	Feb '25
Classic 350	£4,619	349cc single	72mph	19bhp	79mpg	The hugely successful Meteor dressed up like an old Bullet. Easy-going basic Sunday plodder.	7/10	Aug '22
Meteor	£4,219	349cc single	72mph	19bhp	79mpg	Simple, chirpy character, light handling, nicely made, and super cheap. Fast? No way. Fun? Yes.	8/10	Nov '21
SUZUKI suzuki-gb.co.uk; 0845 850 8800 *Bike's* choice: V-Strom 800DE is everything a mid-size adventure should be								
Hayabusa	£18,599	1340cc inline 4	186mph*	187bhp**	42mpg**	There are more powerful bikes. But nothing goes stupid fast with the ease and class of a Busa.	8/10	Jul '22
V-Strom 1050XT	£13,865	1037cc V-twin	137mph	99bhp	52mpg	Loads of gizmos, amazing screen, plush-yet-secure ride, solid motor. It's no GS… but top value.	8/10	Dec '20

Genuinely the Big H

» Yamaha shift a lot of bikes. Indian giants Hero flog more. But no one can topple Honda as the world's largest motorcycle brand. By the time the financial year ends on 31 March, Honda predict they'll have sold 20,200,000 motorcycles in the 2024 financial year. Yes, 20.2 million. It's mainly tiddlers, sure, but still around 40% of all two-wheeler sales. BMW had a best-ever year in 2024, and sold less than 1% of Honda's total…

** *Claimed* * *Estimated*

BIKE	PRICE	ENGINE	TOP SPEED	POWER	MPG	BIKE VERDICT	RATING	TESTED
GSX-S1000GX	**£14,799**	**999cc inline 4**	**145mph****	**150bhp***	**45mpg***	The GT (below) in adventure-sports guise. Not perfect, but ace suspension, toys, ride and feel.	**8/10**	**Apr '25**
GSX-S1000GT	**£12,899**	**999cc inline 4**	**155mph***	**150bhp***	**46mpg****	GSX-R oomph, comfort, lots of toys, fine looks. Trad' proper-fast-yet-friendly sports tourer.	**8/10**	**Apr '25**
Katana	**£12,699**	**999cc inline 4**	**152mph**	**147bhp**	**46mpg**	Superb GSX-S supernaked with sharp 80s-inspired styling. Bold yet usable, and underrated.	**8/10**	**Nov '19**
V-Strom 800DE	**£13,999**	**776cc twin**	**125mph***	**83bhp****	**52mpg**	Gutsy motor, proper comfort, better suspension than rivals, and fine spec list too. Great bike.	**9/10**	**Aug '23**
GSX-8R	**£8,999**	**776cc twin**	**130mph***	**82bhp****	**52mpg***	Think GSX-R mixed with a commuter. Easy to ride, friendly, but also grunty, agile, plush. Lovely.	**9/10**	**Dec '24**
GSX-8S	**£8,299**	**776cc twin**	**130mph***	**82bhp****	**50mpg***	Usable grunt, secure handling, fine ride, nicely made. Pricier than MT-07 and Hornet, but better.	**9/10**	**Jul '23**
V-Strom 650 XT	**£8,965**	**645cc V-twin**	**115mph***	**60bhp***	**45mpg**	£700 over the base model (below) gets you hand guards and wire wheels. Worth it for the looks.	**7/10**	**Jul '17**
SV650	**£7,165**	**645cc V-twin**	**122mph**	**74bhp**	**50mpg**	Chirpy, cheerful, usable, quick, proven, though Yam MT-07 has a bit more zip and charm.	**7/10**	**Apr '19**
GSX-R125	**£5,078**	**124cc single**	**80mph***	**15bhp****	**123mpg****	Perky motor, better power-to-weight than rivals, and cheaper. Won't suit big-boned, mind.	**9/10**	**Nov '17**
TRIUMPH triumphmotorcycles.co.uk *Bike's* choice: Speed Twin 1200 isn't perfect, but it's flippin' compelling								
Rocket 3 GT	**£22,695**	**2458cc inline 3**	**138mph****	**165bhp****	**35mpg**	Huge motor is amazing, handling is ridiculous, but firm ride and sheer bulk limit use as 'real' GT.	**8/10**	**Oct '24**
Rocket 3 R	**£21,995**	**2458cc inline 3**	**138mph****	**165bhp****	**35mpg**	Cruiser? Hardly. With a stiff chassis, handling and crazy grunt, the R is a Mad Max supernaked.	**8/10**	**Oct '24**
Tiger 1200 Rally Pro	**£18,295**	**1200cc inline 3**	**140mph***	**148bhp****	**55mpg****	Lots of power, tech, comfort and class, and they've stopped the vibes, too. Well done, Triumph.	**9/10**	**Aug '24**
Speed Twin 1200 RS	**£14,495**	**1200cc twin**	**130mph***	**96bhp****	**50mpg**	Part classic thrummer, part wheel-lifting blingy supernaked. Classy, fast, desirable roadster.	**9/10**	**Feb '25**
Scrambler 1200 XE	**£13,295**	**1200cc twin**	**130mph***	**89bhp****	**56mpg**	Easy-going B-lane thrummer is classy, rewarding, sensibly priced. Think retro adventure bike.	**8/10**	**Jan '25**
Speedmaster	**£12,995**	**1200cc twin**	**110mph***	**76bhp****	**55mpg****	Low-slung Bobber transformed for the USA with beach 'bars, shiny bits and pillion perch.	**8/10**	**Sep '18**
Bonneville Bobber	**£12,995**	**1200cc twin**	**120mph***	**77bhp****	**56mpg**	Oodles of grunt, capable chassis, spot-on stance and feel. Perfect blend of modern and retro.	**9/10**	**Jan '22**
Bonneville T120	**£11,795**	**1200cc twin**	**120mph***	**79bhp****	**54mpg**	Lolloping grunt, steadfast chassis, top finish. Hasn't Street Twin's agility, but has finer ride.	**9/10**	**Sep '18**
Speed Triple RR	**£17,950**	**1160cc inline 3**	**150mph**	**166bhp**	**39mpg**	RS (below) with fairing, GSX-R riding stance, posh suspension. Discontinued – get one for £13k.	**8/10**	**Jun '22**
Speed Triple RS	**£17,495**	**1160cc inline 3**	**175mph***	**178bhp****	**38mpg**	Awesome motor, ace outright handling, full tech. But too stiff and focused for the road. Shame.	**8/10**	**Nov '21**
Scrambler 900	**£9,795**	**900cc twin**	**110mph***	**54bhp****	**60mpg**	The Bonnie platform in laid-back, urban-ready scrambler form. Charming, if a little bit 'meh'.	**7/10**	**Jan '24**
Bonneville T100	**£9,595**	**900cc twin**	**110mph***	**54bhp****	**60mpg**	All the style and easy-going pleasures of the T120. Makes 24bhp less, but is £1900 (!) cheaper.	**9/10**	**Sep '18**
Speed Twin 900	**£8,795**	**900cc twin**	**110mph***	**64bhp****	**60mpg**	Handsome, pleasing, well-made retro with decent grunt and easy-to-flick chassis. Really good.	**9/10**	**Dec '22**
Tiger 900 Rally Pro	**£14,495**	**888cc inline 3**	**130mph***	**106bhp****	**60mpg****	High-tech, high-spec adventurer really can go (almost) anywhere. Brisk, smooth, plush, lovely.	**9/10**	**Mar '24**
Tiger 900 GT Pro	**£13,895**	**888cc inline 3**	**130mph***	**106bhp****	**60mpg****	Great spec, comfort, usability, quality. Top adventurer-tourer, but Rally (above) has more pizazz.	**9/10**	**Nov '24**
Tiger Sport 800	**£10,995**	**798cc inline 3**	**145mph***	**113bhp****	**50mpg***	The brilliant 660 (below) with more wallop and a better spec. Great all-rounder at a great price.	**9/10**	**Apr '25**
Street Triple 765 RS	**£11,295**	**765cc inline 3**	**145mph***	**128bhp****	**53mpg****	Best road-going sporty bike Triumph have ever made. Ace. Less-blingy R (£10,295) is great too.	**9/10**	**Oct '24**
Tiger Sport 660	**£8,945**	**660cc inline 3**	**135mph***	**80bhp****	**60mpg****	660 Trident repackaged as a practical high-riding all-rounder. Giant-slaying brilliance.	**9/10**	**Mar '23**
Daytona 660	**£8,595**	**660cc inline 3**	**135mph***	**94bhp****	**58mpg****	Like a three-cylinder CBR650R. Fit motor, comfy, but not a sharp as rivals. Missing an edge.	**8/10**	**Dec '24**
Trident 660	**£7,895**	**660cc inline 3**	**129mph**	**75bhp**	**54mpg**	Affordable and friendly like an MT-07, sweet handling like a Street Trip'. Bit stiff, otherwise great..	**9/10**	**May '23**
Speed 400	**£5,195**	**398cc single**	**100mph***	**40bhp****	**80mpg****	A2-legal bike with ample performance, quality and 'proper Triumph' feel. Big seller for a reason...	**9/10**	**Feb '25**
VOGE vogeuk.co.uk, 01932 358000 *Bike's* choice: it's not a premium model, but 900's value is remarkable								
DS900X	**£8671**	**895cc twin**	**125mph***	**94bhp****	**60mpg***	By Loncin, who make BMW motors. F900GS power, fine ride, staggering spec for the money.	**8/10**	**Jan '25**
YAMAHA yamaha-motor.co.uk, 01932 358000 *Bike's* choice: sporty and engaging, yet friendly and fun – MT-09 is a proper device								
R1M	**£24,460**	**998cc inline 4**	**186mph**	**192bhp**	**40mpg**	MotoGP-derived electronics + track-focused superbike = incredible. Limited availability.	**9/10**	**Feb '21**
MT-10 SP	**£16,510**	**998cc inline 4**	**153mph**	**152bhp**	**38mpg**	Already amazing MT-10 with R1 SP's electronic suspenders. Great, if not obviously better.	**9/10**	**May '17**
MT-10	**£14,210**	**998cc inline 4**	**153mph**	**152bhp**	**38mpg**	Not as wild as some rivals, but cheaper, easier to ride, and still epic. Thinking rider's supernaked.	**9/10**	**Aug '22**
Niken GT	**£16,210**	**890cc inline 3**	**117mph**	**113bhp****	**45mpg***	Three-wheeler has more front-end grip than anything, fit motor, fine touring ability Ace, but odd.	**8/10**	**Aug '23**
Tracer 9 GT+	**£14,910**	**890cc inline 3**	**146mph**	**107bhp**	**57mpg**	The defining 'mid-size' upright sports tourer. Not the cheapest, but easily the best. Fabulous.	**10/10**	**Feb '24**
XSR900 GP	**£12,506**	**890cc inline 3**	**135mph***	**117bhp****	**50mpg***	If this is the future of retro, sign us up. XSR in '80s fag-packet sportsbike form is a glorious thing.	**9/10**	**Sep '24**
Tracer 9	**£11,010**	**890cc inline 3**	**146mph**	**107bhp**	**47mpg**	Adventurer presence, comfort, practicality – it's a top road bike. High-spec GT worth the extra.	**9/10**	**Apr '23**
XSR900	**£10,610**	**890cc inline 3**	**130mph**	**107bhp**	**49mpg**	Ace MT-09 reworked into a convincing '80s flat-bar superbike. Cool, fun, sexy, but a bit stiff.	**9/10**	**Nov '22**
MT-09 SP	**£11,310**	**890cc inline 3**	**130mph***	**117bhp****	**48mpg**	Öhlins shock, classy forks, R1M paint job, brilliant engine. Superb everyday semi-supernaked.	**9/10**	**Oct '24**
MT-09	**£10,100**	**890cc inline 3**	**130mph***	**117bhp****	**49mpg***	Top triple has new-found handling prowess and tech, but keeps its usable playfulness. Proper.	**9/10**	**Jan '25**
Ténéré World Raid	**£11,910**	**689cc twin**	**120mph***	**72bhp****	**61mpg**	Mega Ténéré (below) with large tank and tall dirt-biased set-up. Better on trails, worse on road.	**8/10**	**Oct '22**
Ténéré 700	**£10,110**	**689cc twin**	**120mph***	**72bhp****	**55mpg***	Fit MT-07 motor in Dakar-ish chassis. Charms on tarmac, rocks on trails. Tall, light, raw, but ace.	**9/10**	**Aug '23**
Tracer 7	**£8,810**	**689cc twin**	**125mph***	**70bhp**	**56mpg**	Super-fun MT-07 with practical niceties. The datum for all-rounder value. GT even better.	**9/10**	**Aug '20**
R7	**£8,910**	**689cc twin**	**130mph***	**72bhp****	**56mpg***	More than a faired MT-07. Lacks a bit of wow but properly sporty, ace in corners, fun, affordable.	**8/10**	**Aug '22**
XSR700	**£8,260**	**689cc twin**	**119mph**	**70bhp**	**49mpg**	MT-07 in period costume. Proof retro looks can work with a modern dynamic. LC paint is great.	**9/10**	**Jun '16**
MT-07	**£7,510**	**689cc twin**	**122mph***	**74bhp**	**48mpg**	Fun, capable, perky, appealing, good value. Great bike, but Honda Hornet makes it feel dated.	**9/10**	**May '23**
R3	**£6,405**	**321cc twin**	**102mph***	**41bhp****	**65mpg**	Light, revvy, fun-to-ride, well finished. Ability and spec fight for title of best A2 sportsbike.	**8/10**	**May '19**
R125	**£5,302**	**125cc single**	**80mph***	**15bhp**	**92mpg**	R1 looks, big bike feel, clever engine. Easy to see why they sell so many to enthusiastic teens.	**8/10**	**May '19**
ZERO zeromotorcycles.com, +3172 5112014 *Bike's* choice: SR/S is good enough to convert stubborn petrolheads								
SR/S Premium	**£20,495**	**electric motor**	**124mph****	**110bhp****	**242mpc**	Fast, torquey, smooth, hi-spec, great to ride. Range and charge time bearable. Price a bit salty.	**8/10**	**Jul '22**
S	**£14,540**	**electric motor**	**86mph****	**59bhp****	**200mpc**	Simple commuter has basic chassis, slow charging and ain't cheap, but costs peanuts to run.	**6/10**	**Dec '20**

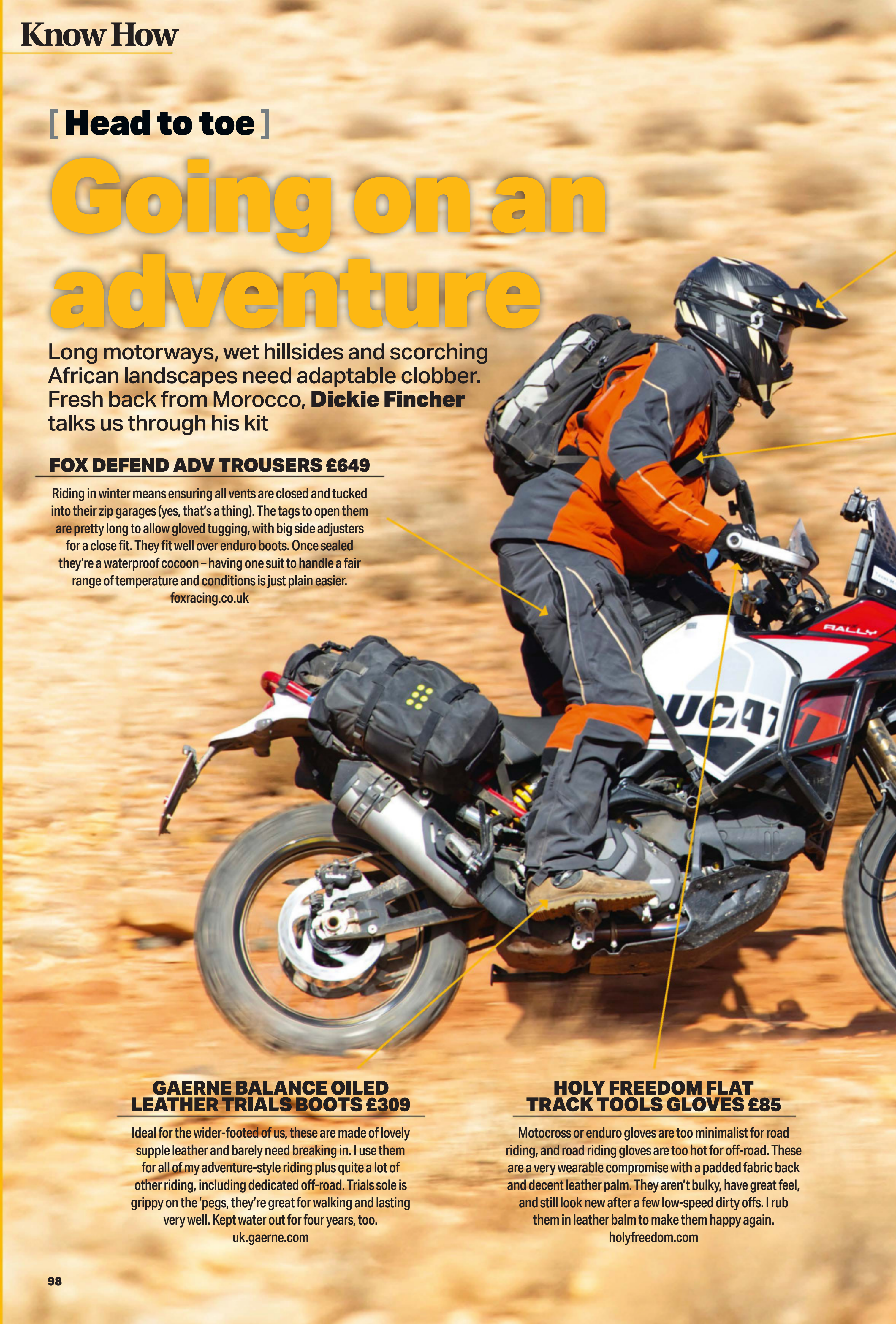
Great idea, but...

New Zealand firm UBCO recently signed a deal to supply funky two-wheel-drive electric utility bikes to the NZ post service. And then swiftly laid off all staff and ceased trading. Despite being a funky cross between a Honda Cub and Swiss army knife, and cool features like 19 lugs for attaching clutter, the 'ready for anything' 2x2 has been a financial flop. Crying shame: surely this is what electric power was invented for.

[**Head to toe**]

Going on an adventure

Long motorways, wet hillsides and scorching African landscapes need adaptable clobber. Fresh back from Morocco, **Dickie Fincher** talks us through his kit



FOX DEFEND ADV TROUSERS £649

Riding in winter means ensuring all vents are closed and tucked into their zip garages (yes, that's a thing). The tags to open them are pretty long to allow gloved tugging, with big side adjusters for a close fit. They fit well over enduro boots. Once sealed they're a waterproof cocoon – having one suit to handle a fair range of temperature and conditions is just plain easier.
foxracing.co.uk

GAERNE BALANCE OILED LEATHER TRIALS BOOTS £309

Ideal for the wider-footed of us, these are made of lovely supple leather and barely need breaking in. I use them for all of my adventure-style riding plus quite a lot of other riding, including dedicated off-road. Trials sole is grippy on the 'pegs, they're great for walking and lasting very well. Kept water out for four years, too.
uk.gaerne.com

HOLY FREEDOM FLAT TRACK TOOLS GLOVES £85

Motocross or enduro gloves are too minimalist for road riding, and road riding gloves are too hot for off-road. These are a very wearable compromise with a padded fabric back and decent leather palm. They aren't bulky, have great feel, and still look new after a few low-speed dirty offs. I rub them in leather balm to make them happy again.
holyfreedom.com

AGV AX9 CARBON £529

Peaky lids help keep roost and low sun out of the face. Adventure ones have sealing visors and wind tunnel-tested peaks… I went for this because AGV lids fit me well (and it was discounted to £370). Very light, suitably vented, and seals properly for UK winters; then you can whip out the chin vent covers, open the top vents and swap the visor for goggles for a very airy environment.
agv.com

FOX DEFEND ADV JACKET £699

Well-placed vent zips, little toggles to hold them open, and a second central zip for a mesh panel that allows gallons of air through the front – especially once rear vents are open. D3O level 1 armour in the back, shoulders and elbows, and Gore-Tex laminate waterproofing. I'm 183cm tall and weigh 105kg, and the XL is a good fit (apart from the waist, ahem).
foxracing.co.uk

> 'Aren't bulky, have great feel, and still look new after a few dirty offs'

[Know it all]

Tarmac

Surinder Samra is principal pavement advisor for National Highways, the body responsible for England's motorways and A-roads

Let's start with some pedantry. Modern asphalt is not tarmac. The term tarmac was used to describe a mix of tar and stone, whereas modern asphalt uses bitumen instead of tar as the binder and has additives such as polymers. Subtle modifications to the proportions of bitumen, aggregates [ie, stones – Ed] and additives let us match the asphalt to the road's requirements for grip, drainage and noise.

From a safety perspective, we need to maintain an adequate level of skidding resistance on the network in both the wet and dry, and at high or low speed. In dry conditions all clean, surfaced roads offer good skidding resistance. At lower speeds in the wet, skidding resistance is provided by the surface of the aggregates – a property known as micro-texture.

The micro-texture characteristics of a particular stone depend on its polishing susceptibility under the action of tyre forces. The least susceptible stone to polishing is used in places where the greatest level of skidding resistance is needed – such as busy bends, approaches to pedestrian crossings…

At higher speeds in the wet, skidding resistance is predominantly provided by a coarser 'macro-texture' that allows water to rapidly drain through the gaps between adjacent stones, leaving the stones' surface above the water.

Anguish as new iPhone becomes tarmac (sorry, asphalt)

Then there's Shellgrip, which is a type of high friction surfacing (HFS). We use this to enhance road safety in high-risk areas like bends, intersections, and steep gradients. It gives better skid resistance than any exposed asphalt matrix, even with a highly polishing-resistant stone. But, of course, it is more expensive, so must be used judiciously.

We also use PQC (pavement quality concrete) because it offers greater durability. However, asphalt is quieter and more versatile, and is used for 96 per cent of the SRN (strategic roads network – A-roads and motorways).

PIC: NATIONAL MOTOR MUSEUM/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

[The best tyres for your…]

Massive bagger

Pirelli Diablo Powercruiser

£300 pair (est)

pirelli.com

» The heavier a bike, the more performance it has, the more it asks of its tyres. Stands to reason. Despite this, tyres for hefty tourers and huge cruisers often focus on durability, and employ older design/technology. With the latest bikes having wild motors and physics-bending handling (see the Indian on p93), Pirelli have added a 'touring-cruiser' fitment to their Diablo family. The new Diablo Powercruiser promises quick warm-up, dual compounds, grip and wet-weather confidence like the other Diablos, with a familiar pattern, too. With a huge range of sizes (fronts from 16in to 21in diameter, rears from 180 to 240 wide) the Powercruiser comes in both radial and cross-ply, with its structure depending on size and fitment. Due later this year. *MA*

[New rider]

‘This is worlds apart’

Training for his A2 licence, **Ed Armitage** gets to the bit he’s been waiting for – his first taste of a big bike

MOTORCYCLE SAFETY
HONDA
TRAINING

Light work of manoeuvring the heavier 500

We’re in a damp, nondescript car park and I’m stood by the Honda CB125F that I’ve been training on. My instructor from Roadcraft Nottingham, Ben, calls me over and tells me to take him the key. Ah. Did I do something wrong? Am I going to have to read a far-off numberplate? Is he going to make me slalom through the cones on foot?

No. Ben tells me to climb onto the new Honda CB500 Hornet he’s been riding, swaps keys with me, and tells me to slip it into the ignition. This is it, the moment I’ve been waiting for: my first time ever on a 500. Every ounce of my being is tingling with excitement and, yes, nerves. My days of the 125 are over – I’ve made it to a big bike.

Ben runs me through how the Hornet is different to the CB125F that I’m so familiar with. ‘More power, sharper brakes, bigger tyres, faster acceleration,’ he says, ‘and most importantly, more weight.’

However, straight off the bat it’s the clutch that’s most different to me. Ben has me with both feet firmly on the ground, fingers loitering near the brake, just getting a feel for the clutch… and wow, it’s so smooth. Unlike on nearly all 125s I’ve ridden, which have what feels like metres of lever travel before the bite point and then on-or-off operation, the CB500 has a progressive action and offers so much more control. And the twin-cylinder engine just wants to get going.

I get dialled in to the clutch, the extra weight and different characteristics of the 500 around cones. Then it’s on to acceleration, gear changes and, most importantly, braking. The similarities I expected between the 125 and 500 don’t exist; other than they both have two wheels, they’re miles apart. The 125 may as well be a bicycle.

Ben’s plan was to give me a taster in the safety of a car park. As a Honda-approved school, it’s the exact opposite to being rushed onto the big bike and bundled through a test – it’s all done properly and for a reason. But it seems I’ve adapted well and so will be finishing today on the CB500. There’s an unshakeable grin slapped on my face as we head out on the roads.

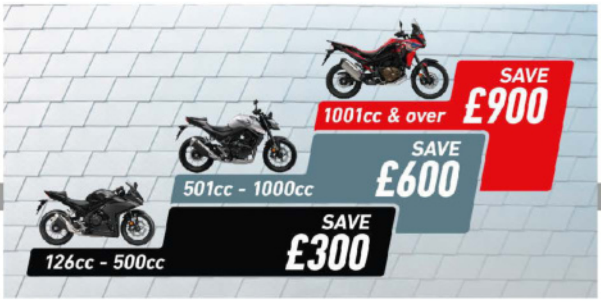
Yes, there’s so much lovely thrust, but again the clutch is the most noticeable difference compared to the small bike.

Do it on an ’onda

Honda’s New Rider programme offers a complete package to get folk on two wheels. It includes everything: CBT, training at one of the many Approved Honda training schools all over the country, your tests, a new motorbike and even the riding kit. The whole lot is then bundled into monthly payments, with the bike on PCP and everything else on an RUL (restricted use loan). Taking a CB500 Hornet as an example, after a deposit of £1041.40 the caboodle comes in at £133.83 per month for 36 months. That’s for the whole shooting match: training, tests, new clobber, spanking-fresh bike.

Honda also have a ‘Level Up’ scheme. Book with one of their approved schools to upgrade from A1 to an A2 licence, or A2 to a full A licence, and you then get money off a new bike. There’s £300 off bikes from 126 to 500cc, £600 on 501 to 1000cc, and a sizeable £900 off anything bigger.

» **honda.co.uk/engineroom/learn-to-ride/**



'Every ounce of my being tingles with excitement'

I find myself using it much more than I did on the 125. In town I barely touch the throttle – the 500 seems able to do what and how I want without any real twistgrip movement. The weight is apparent in slow corners and coming to a stop. I'm using more of my body in tight corners so as not to swing wide into oncoming buses and Nottingham's many trams. And the smoothness of the ride is my favourite bit of this new experience – the larger bike is so silky and controlled.

I expected to be a little overwhelmed by the 500, but the training has worked. I feel confident. The next week and I'm back out on the Hornet with instructor Leanna, and I'm immediately at home. It's all paid off a treat.

They told me at the start that from this point it'll all seem like it happens quickly – and they're right. My mock module one test is this weekend then my theory test is next week. Wish me luck… ***EA***

Making the step

'People take to the 500 well because of the way we train them,' says Roadcraft's Leanna Moore. 'We keep riders on a 125 for longer than most other schools – a lot of schools will do CBT and then the very next lesson transfer the person onto a big bike. We don't do it like that anymore.

'We train riders for longer on a 125, until they show the consistency we're looking for. We're looking for machine control: they need to be consistently smooth, whether that's clutch, throttle, or using the brakes. We find the transition from 125 to 500cc is really easy – there are no wide-eyed moments because they've perfected their skills, and the way we transfer them with an intensive car park session [on the 500] makes it natural. It's the procedural element: when they get on the 500, they're not having to think about where to be in a lane, what side the roundabout lifesaver should be on, and so on. That will all happen by itself, and they can focus on the machine control.

'Sometimes we'll put someone on a 500 in the car park but put them back on a 125 for the road. Some people don't understand and don't want to stay on the smaller bikes – they want to be on the bigger one immediately. But when they do progress, they then understand. It makes moving to the 500 easy.'

» **roadcraftnottingham.co.uk**

» **youtube.com/@RoadcraftNottingham**

CBTs and As: what you can do when

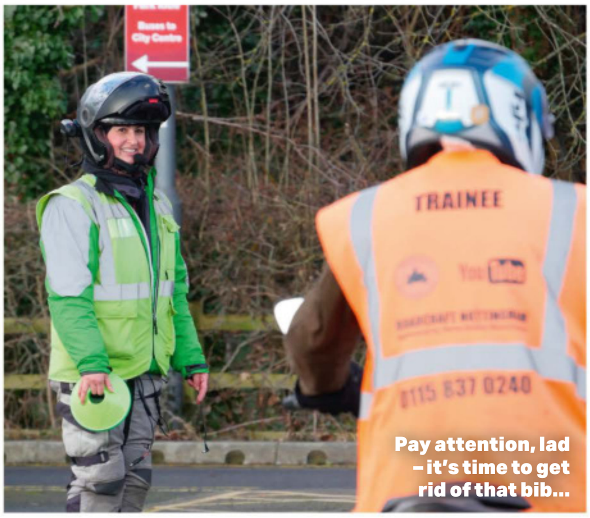
» **16 years old:** compulsory basic training (CBT), ride a 50cc moped on L-plates, no passenger. Allows a 125 once you turn 17. Valid for two years (becomes a full AM moped licence if you pass a car test).

» **17 years old:** CBT, ride a 125 on L-plates, no passenger. Or do an A1 licence test to ditch the Ls and carry pillions on a 125: theory test, module one test (manoeuvring), module two test (on the road).

» **19 years old:** A2 licence, ride up to 47bhp – CBT and theory (if not already done), module one, module two. Once you've held an A2 for two years you can do the unrestricted A licence.

» **24 years old:** A licence, ride anything, known as direct access. CBT and theory (if not done), module one, module two.

No licence automatically upgrades – your A2 doesn't become an A licence after two years or when you reach the required age, for example.



Pay attention, lad – it's time to get rid of that bib…

[Out & about]

The art of pootling

Soul-warming rides don't need big miles or famous destinations. **Mike Armitage** goes for a glorious trundle on a Guzzi V85 TT…

Diving down into a valley, the tight road ahead is unknown. The view over the hedgerows is not one I'm familiar with, and as the narrow tarmac twists through the centre of a farmyard the cows give me a look that says 'and who are you?'. This genuinely feels like I could be anywhere.

Except that, well… I'm not actually being particularly adventurous. In fact, if I hopped the gate and toddled to the top of the curiously pointy hill in the next field, I could probably see where I live. According to the trip meter on the Moto Guzzi V85 TT, I've only covered four miles since I left my drive. Yet despite having lived in the same village for the past 20 years, despite going past it probably thousands of times, I've never been down this single-track lane. Sounds preposterous, but the reason is that it doesn't go anywhere – and as there are quick, smooth, more obvious routes to all the actual local places, I've never had reason to take the turning.

So today I have. The sun's out, the sky is clear and, being early afternoon, the dry roads are in that quiet window between lunch-dash workers and school-run traffic – and so I'm enjoying a pootle. Destinations are great. Be it café, dealer or famous mountain pass, having an end point can give a ride purpose, and this issue is full of great examples. But you don't have to think big. There's joy in just setting off and trundling; in loosening the tug on the twistgrip, taking the time to notice what's under your nose.

The farmyard-dissecting lane drops me onto the quiet backwater to Hickling, where I manage to resist a latte with ginger syrup at the excellent Old Wharf tearoom and head to Long Clawson, picking up a single-track lane meandering deeper along the Vale of Belvoir (pronounced beaver, as in the fat-tailed dam-builder). The Guzzi saunters with a deep contented purr, teasing along lazily on its easy torque and floating on plush suspension. A sunny country-scented draught tickles through my open visor. Some ducks perform a perfectly synchronised landing on the old Grantham canal. It's all rather pleasant.

I'd argue that you can potter on anything. Obviously, a 1981 Honda CD200 Benly may be mildly better suited to low-speed wandering than a 2025 BMW M1000RR, but it's all about mindset. The V85 feels ideal, though. The 853cc

Warming sun, empty lane, time to gawp

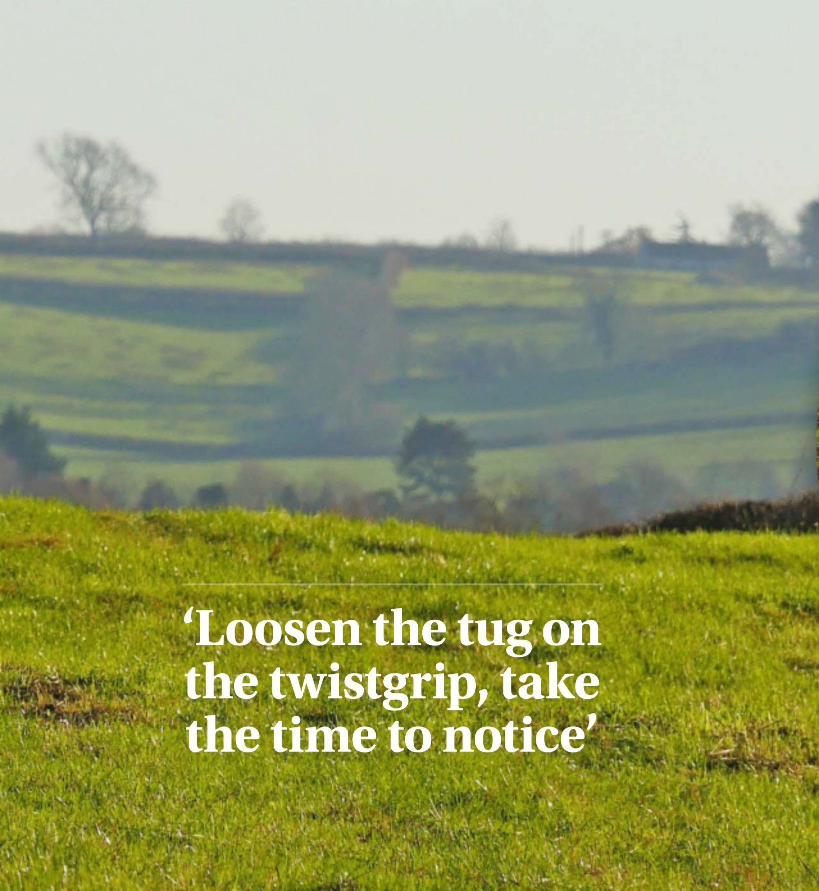
Doesn't matter if it's one horsepower or 80 – the aim is the same

Earlier V85s used tube; new castings are a bit Triumph

Simple, chunky quality. Ace ride comfort, too

air-cooled V-twin has a touchy-feely nature and is happy lolloping in a tall gear, its chassis swings about with breezy simplicity, and the riding stance allows easy nosing into fields and gardens. It feels… cuddly.

The Vale is a gulley of low ground that runs north-east from Melton Mowbray to Lincoln, edged by the A46 – the Fosse Way – on its western side and by the A607 to the east. Many of the villages and roads are familiar, so I'm intentionally taking turnings I wouldn't normally. Going left instead of right. Vale of Belvoir comes from the Norman-French for 'beautiful view', and from the steep



'Loosen the tug on the twistgrip, take the time to notice'

Capability and charm in harmony – V85 is Mike's fave adventurist

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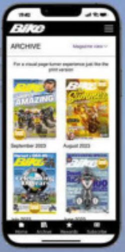

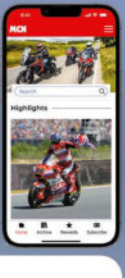

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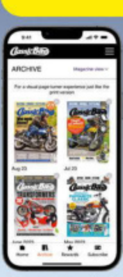

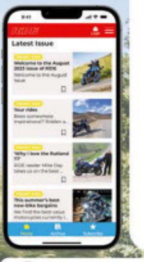

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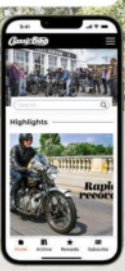

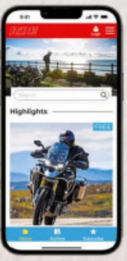

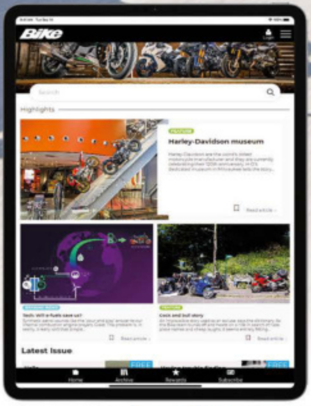

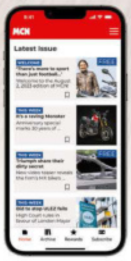

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edges they're far-reaching. I stop down a random single-track lane, perch on a gate and polish off a butty while pondering the vista. The V85's a handsome swine too: I'm a sucker for its sticky-out cylinders, offset rear shock and chunky lines.

Over the A52 and I carry on weaving, picking out smooth deserted backwaters. Longhedge Lane runs from Flintham to Alverton but has a gloriously meandering might-end-up-somewhere feel. And naff-all traffic. After going back and forth over the convoluted route of the canal and taking roads for villages I've never heard of, I must have done three times the distance that the most direct route would have covered.

Back around Bottesford and Redmile, and a twisting climb takes me past Belvoir Castle and through heavy woodland. Turning back towards home, the road scamps along the ridge of the Vale and delivers hairpin-like turns on the run into Eastwell. The V85's upright perch means ample opportunity to gawp at the expansive view to my right. After an afternoon of dawdling, the Guzzbox also feels long-legged and thrusting on this faster, flowing tarmac – exploring what's under my nose and bumbling without purpose, I've rarely passed 40mph all afternoon.

I have, however, discovered new places and roads, watched tractors on a distant horizon, found a nice pub for lunch this Sunday, and bonded with the charming V85 in a different way.

Which, of course, has all been entirely the point. ***MA***

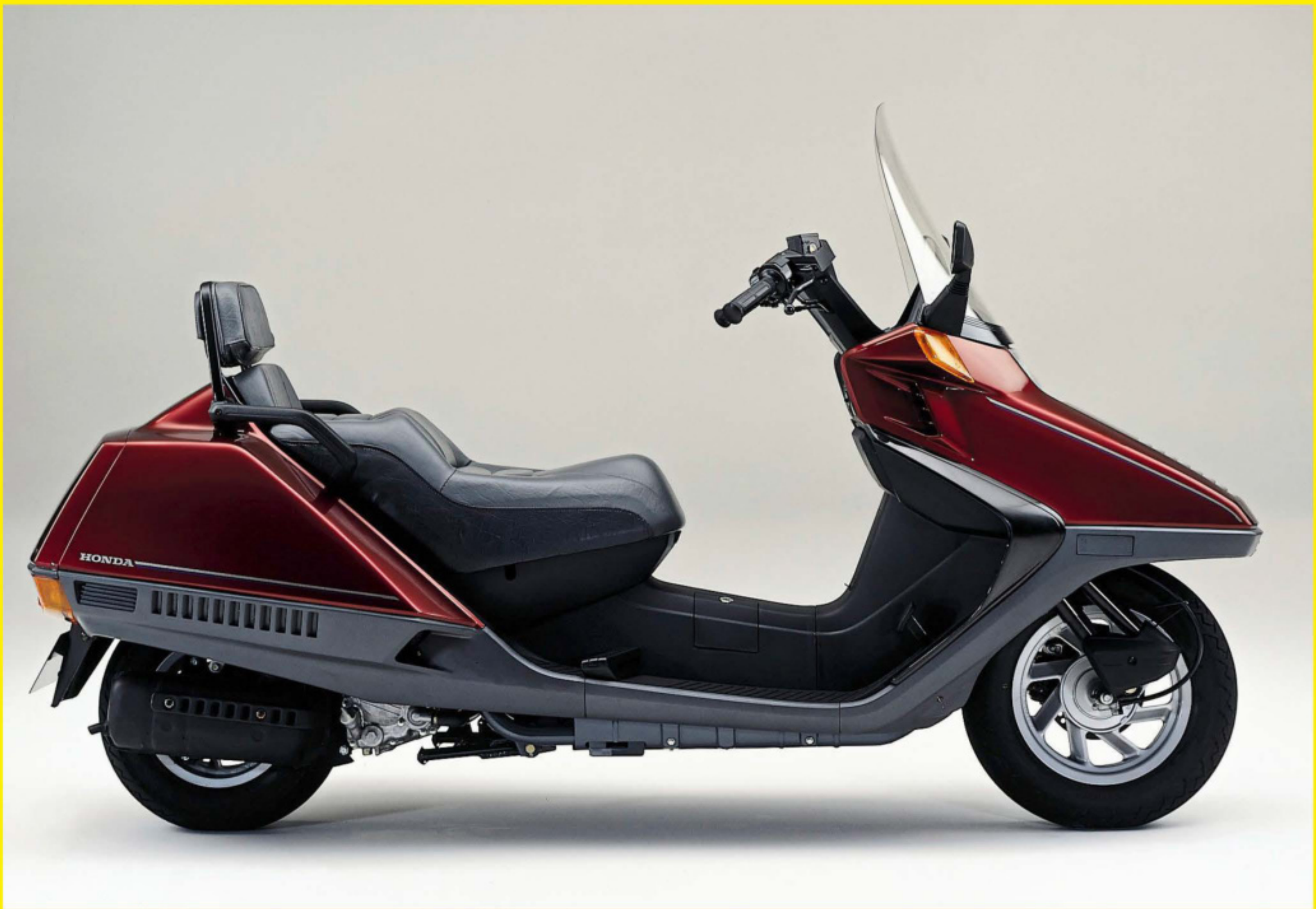
SPORT
AVG FUEL
44.9
46
mph
4
GEAR

High gear, low speed, much happiness (but surely in the wrong mode)

Perfect pootling pointers

- » **Don't overthink it. Just set off and enjoy where it takes you.**
- » Leave your earplugs out. It'll discourage high speed and encourage sight-seeing dawdling. And hearing the environment adds a layer, too.
- » **Be inquisitive. Don't recognise a junction or place name? All the more reason to go that way.**
- » Wave at horse riders, children and walkers. And farmers. Everyone, in fact.
- » **Give yourself time. Clock watching brings rushing and known routes; pootling is about detaching from the daily rush.**
- » Take a butty. Better still, enjoy grub somewhere unknown or stop for a cheeky half.

'Ample opportunity to gawp at the expansive view to my right'



[Ahead of its time]

1986 Honda CN250

Until the mid-1980s, Maxi meant a curious sloped-back Austin. Then Honda wheeled out the Helix and bump-started a whole new biking culture

Honda are good at piggybacking, plagiarising, flat-out copying, and generally working their position as the pre-eminent big dog in the corporate two-wheeled bear pit. They also invent. And when they do, the result is invariably very, very good.

So it was with the 1986 CN250. Variously, depending on sales territory, the Helix, Fusion or Spazio (as in Italian for space, as in room, not the Milky Way), this 244cc automatic redefined step-thru scootering for the time, and for all time.

Its competition at the high end of scooter engine capacity at the time was from Italian firms Lambretta and Vespa, both with 200cc two-strokes. Cult scoots, severely outdated, never outmoded, yet relics of the 1950s. The CN was a revolution.

The almost recumbent riding position was the first indicator this was a step-change. The onboard carrying capacity the next. The clean, easy drive from the automatic liquid-cooled four-stroke single the clincher. And it looked like no other scoot. There was ample room for a passenger. The dash was a backlit LCD affair, the 'bars all squared-off in vinyl, it had hectares of legroom, and although it got a bit vague on the steering above 70mph, it would cruise at 65mph all day, every day. It also had a Fastnet lighthouse of a main beam.

PIC: HONDA

The scooteristi of 1986 weren't too sure about it, but as modernists (mods) many were swift to appreciate its virtues. After all, if any two-wheeled subcult is to thrive, new blood is essential. An ultra-modern scooter with 100,000-mile longevity, 70mpg capability, and day-in/day-out dependability was more than welcome.

Naturally enough Suzuki brought the Burgman to market in 1988, but Yamaha didn't offer anything remotely 'maxi' until the middle of the 1990s, and Kawasaki were too busy building ships to bother.

The CN enjoyed a 20-year model run, with outraged Japanese scooter clubs imploring the factory to restart production after a hiatus in 2002 (which Honda agreed to).

Odd how a scooter that demolished perceived notions of a cheap, simple, family two-wheeler could reinvent the concept of a cheap, simple, family two-wheeler. Strange how smokey two-bangers were consigned to the bin, a whole new maxi-class promulgated, and the CN250 not heralded as the BSA Bantam of its time… is weird.

Certainly, it's not the Honda Cub of its era, or any era. Nothing is ever likely to surpass the Cub's 100 million units sold marker. But when a smoothly ridden TMAX comes up the inside of you when you're thinking you're the king of the blacktop on a decent, open, fast A-road… you have Honda to curse. Maxi-scooters are now a big thing. And Big H began the big deal. ***Mark Graham***

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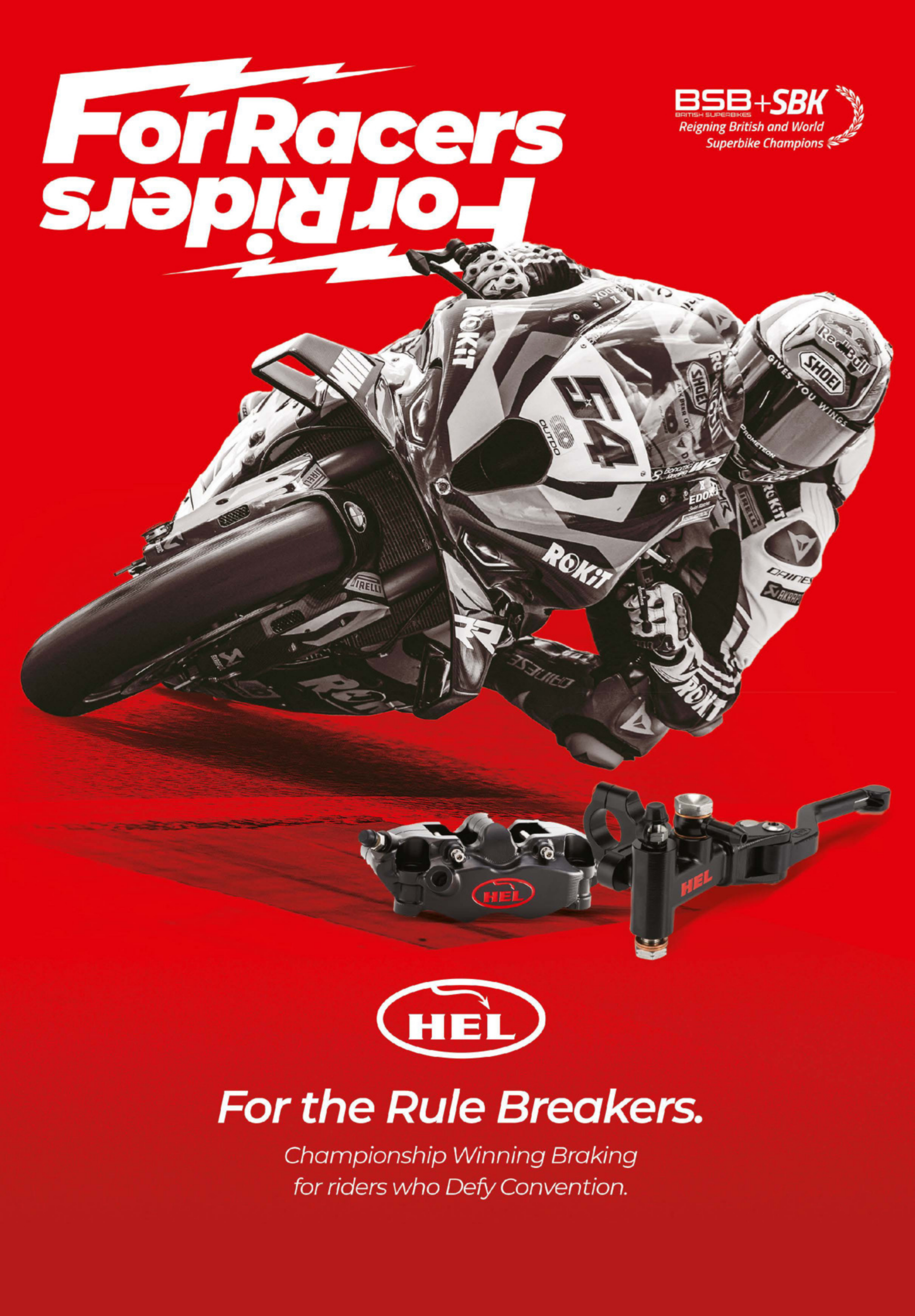
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